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WEEKLY

OCT. 12

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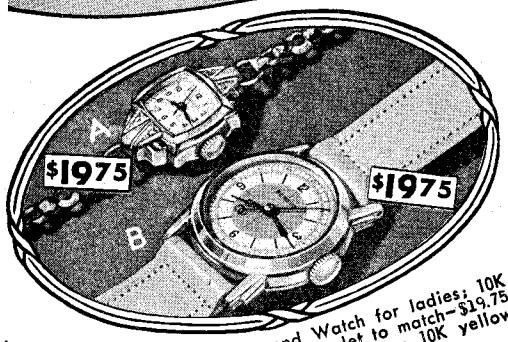
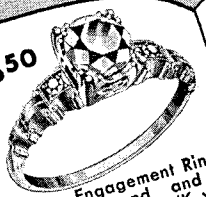


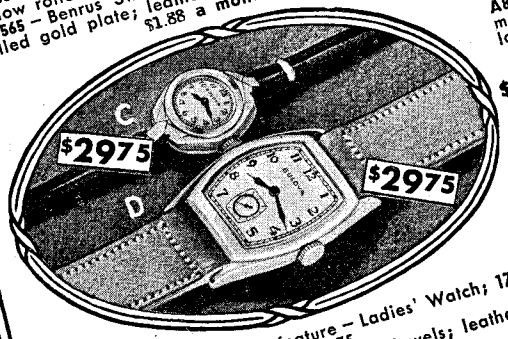
A-T566—Benrus Sweepsecond Watch for ladies; 10K yellow rolled gold plate; bracelet to match—$29.75
B-0565—Benrus Sweepsecond for men; 10K yellow rolled gold plate; leather strap. $19.75.
$1.88 a month


$48.50

A265—Engagement Ring; large diamond and 2 other diamonds; 14K yellow gold. **$4.75 a month**

$33.50

A84/C75—Bridal Set; 8 diamonds; both rings 14K yellow gold. **$3.15 a month**



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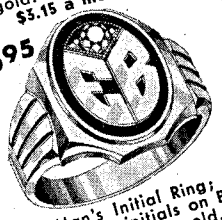
D-M134—Bulova feature for men; 17 jewels; leather strap—$29.75.
$2.38 a month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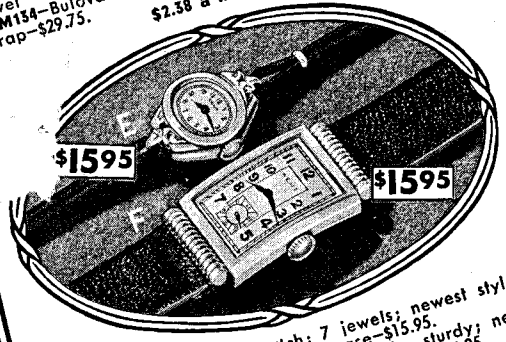
1154—Man's Initial Ring; diamond and 2 initials on Black Onyx; 10K yellow gold. **$1.60 a month**



E-P159—Ladies' Kent Watch; 7 jewels; newest style 10K yellow rolled gold plate case—$15.95.
F-K190—Man's Kent Watch; 7 jewels; sturdy; new style; 10 yellow rolled gold plate case—$15.95.
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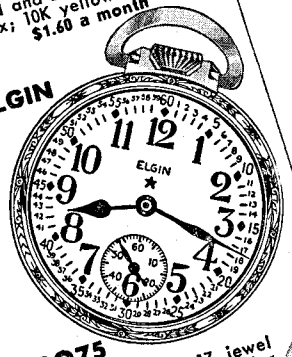

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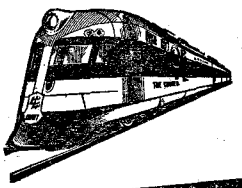

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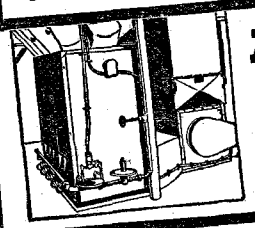

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Volume 302 CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER 12, 1940 Number 5

Racketeers in the Sky—*Novelet*.....Jack Williamson 6
Presenting Dr. Bull: greatest quack, greatest actor, and most superb scrapper in the universe—fighting a battle for the planets

Crooked Caribbean Cross—*Second of seven parts*....Borden Chase 26
Welcome, Señor Kyle. Will you try our specially imported poison?

No Minutes to Go—*Short Story*.....Eustace Cockrell 45
Score: Skullduggery and a touch of school spirit—20; Ames Conroy—0. But they made him like it

Red Snow—*Novelet*.....Arthur Lawson 55
There's one piece missing from an outlaw map—and it's the marker for men's graves

Rebel Take Arms—*Third of four parts*.....Robert Carse 74
Who strikes a blow for freedom must defy the world

Men of Daring—*True Story in Pictures*.....Stookie Allen 90
Arizona Bill—Last of the Frontiersmen

Ticket for Freeport—*Short Short Story*.....Chandler Whipple 92
An Argosy Oddity

Señor Devil-may-care—*Conclusion*.....Johnston McCulley 95
Now the caballeros learn the meaning of this: to stand before him is suicide; to stand with him is honor

Don't Keed the Monkeys.....W. Weinstock Smith 25

Argonotes 110

Looking Ahead!..... 111

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Present conditions in the paper market have made it expedient for the publishers of this magazine to reduce the number of its pages. However, by using a slightly smaller type, not one word of the fiction contents of the book has been sacrificed. In many issues we have found the wordage to be *higher* than formerly. ARGOSY still gives you more words and better stories for your dime.

A **RED STAR** *Magazine*

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WILLIAM T. DEWART, President & Treasurer WILLIAM T. DEWART, JR., Secretary

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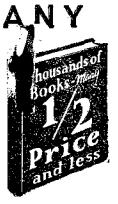

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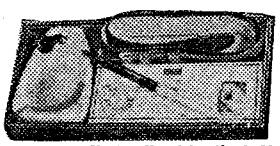

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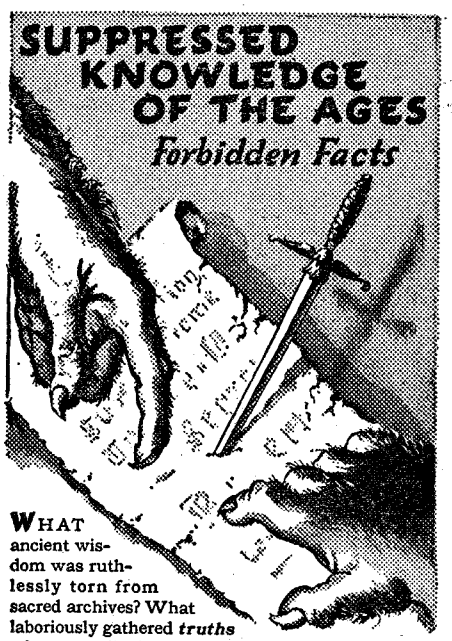

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I

DR. BULL was swimming in his private pool, on Taurus, when the space attacker was discovered. The crystal-walled pool, on the doctor's infinitesimal, independent planetoid, was proportionately as big as a respectable sea.

Dr. Bull was a stout little man, with a smooth pink globe of a head. He had a clean professional white beard, merry blue eyes, and a considerable paunch. Soft pink flesh bulged out above his swimming trunks —which were embroidered with gold, *Doctor Bull.* Altogether, he suggested an incongruously aged and weighty cupid.

Under the sky's depthless, inky blue, ruby tiles and gold rails glittered luxuriously. The white Sun struck with invigorating force through the thin, cool synthetic atmosphere. A graviscreen under the pool halved the force of the gravity generators at the tiny moon's core, so that one swam with an exhilarating and luxurious ease.

Oblivious of the shadow of menace approaching, Dr. Bull was floating on the warm bright water, watching his companion in the pool. She was a svelte blond nurse, in a green bathing suit. At forty-seven, Dr. Bull still possessed an acute appreciation, and Vera Frame was worthy of it.

The Sun glinted on her limbs as she dove. She came up, and made a playful splash. But a mellow gong had chimed over the pool, and the little doctor's eyes went to a hooded telescreen above the water. The nurse looked over his shoulder—wondering a little at his continued interest in a telecast that had been repeated, with minor variations, every hour on the hour for thirteen years.

The dark screen lit with the red outline of an extremely masculine bull, branded with the zodiacal sign. That faded into the neatly bearded face of Dr. Bull himself, telecast from a prepared sound-film.

"Hello, all the planets!"

The little doctor's canned voice was brisk and friendly. Above the starched-looking white beard, his blues eyes twinkled confidently through gold-rimmed glasses. (He didn't really need the glasses, but they lent an air. The beard was important, too. In the old days, before he could grow his own, he had used a false Vandyke to launch the original Dr. Bull's Interplanetary Carnival, Clinic, and Medicine Show.)

The image smiled on the screen, with professional cheer. "This is Dr. Bull, the Planeteer, bringing you good news and good health over TAU, the most powerful telecast station in the system—good news of how Taurium and my radiogenic reactivation treatment can bring good health to you."

The telecast power of TAU, indeed, was

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Carstairs dropped like a log, and Doctor Bull had to face the enemy alone

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calculated to penetrate the ionosphere of every planet. Patrol spacemen and ICC officials raged at its roaring, image-blurring interference. But meteor miners and remote colonists depended on it for news of the system, and came to regard Dr. Bull as a crusading saint. Any inhabitants of the hypothetical worlds of the nearer stars were doubtless becoming familiar with the astounding curative powers of Taurium and the radigenic reactivation treatment.

Dr. Bull was in very bad odor with the Interplanetary Medical Association.

The IMA claimed that Taurium was common mud, manufactured from plain water and the blue clay of Taurus—and now largely adulterated with clay from Earth, since the extraordinary demand had threatened to use up the entire little planet. Outraged and impotent officials of the Interplanetary Communications Commission made unkind puns on his name. He had been forbidden to practice medicine or operate a telecast transmitter anywhere within the jurisdiction of the Solar League.

But—

The pink little man floating contentedly beside the feline nurse was the only physician in the system—if, in defiance of the baffled IMA, you agreed that he *was* a physician—who was also undisputed dictator of a sovereign planet.

TAURUS once had been a dead and useless rock. Exiled from the League, by the combined wrath of the IMA, the ICC, and the Sun Patrol, Dr. Bull had spent hundreds of millions, to convert the bleak asteroid into "the moon of health." In a shaft drilled to the little world's heart, planetary engineers installed gravity equipment and geodesic drive.

After Dr. Bull had pulled sufficient strings to insure the continued independence of Taurus, they had steered it into a new orbit, as Earth's inner moon. Now the naked stone was clothed with lawns and groves and gardens. Taurus glittered with expensive modernistic hospitals, clinics, hotels, casinos. Dr. Bull was always coining new descriptive slogans for it. Jewel of Space. Hub of Fun. Wonder-moon.

To the relief of the handsome nurse, he touched a golden button on the wall of the pool, to shut off the telecast receiver. After a few thousand repetitions, even the most effective spiel loses novelty. Floating, with his eyes closed, Dr. Bull sighed contentedly. Softly, he murmured three words:

"Imagination. Audacity. Victory."

He was thinking back to the very beginning of his career—when he was just a six-dollar-a-week soda jerker, in a dusty small-town drug store, back on Earth, studying a mail-order course in dramatics, propped out of the view of his patrons behind the counter. Dramatics, he had decided, was more important than pharmaceutics.

Imagination. Audacity. Victory.

Those three words, he was thinking, were the key to his success. Maybe he could work them into the telecast. They had earned him just about everything that any man could want.

It was then that the bad news arrived, brought by a gaunt gray man in the silver uniform of the Planeteers—so Dr. Bull called the two hundred men who formed the military and police force of his private planet. General Berg burst furiously through the crystal door at the end of the pool, shouting:

"Oh, doctor!"

Dr. Bull lifted his pink round head out of the water. His smooth face made an annoyed little frown against the Sun—which drove hard even through the filter-gases in the artificial atmosphere.

"Berg," he protested, "I was not to be disturbed."

General Berg teetered on the ruby brink, desperately fought for his balance.

"A ship—" he gasped. "A ship coming!"

TAURUS boasted a modern space-port, with docks ample to accommodate the largest interplanetary liners. Vessels arrived every day. They brought the millions

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of illiterately addressed orders for bottles of Taurium, the thousands of passengers that ranged from honeymooners to tottering oldsters seeking new youth through Dr. Bull's reactivation treatment.

"A ship," said Dr. Bull. "Another million dollars!"

General Berg recovered balance and breath. "A warship, sir," he amended stiffly. "It's a patrol cruiser, proceeding from the direction of Appenine Base. It is showing no lights, and refuses to acknowledge the signals from our forts. It has already entered our territorial space."

The continued independence of Taurus, in the face of the patrol's open hostility, was a major political riddle. But Dr. Bull, with the magical combination of Imagination, Audacity, Victory—plus millions, cannily spent—had made it a fact.

The Sun Patrol was bound by several interplanetary treaties to respect the territorial zone of Taurus, a sphere extending a hundred miles from the tiny moon's surface.

Dr. Bull's head abruptly went under the water, and came up looking more red than pink. He splashed furiously with his hands—half-gravity had awkward consequences, when one forgot oneself. Sputtering, he gasped:

"They can't do that!"

The glassy-eyed officer said: "They have done it. The men in the forts are uneasy. And panic is spreading in the hotels and hospitals—some rumor has got out. The telephones are swamped with questions."

Dr. Bull surged out of the pool. "Signal them again," he snapped. "If they don't answer, open fire."

Taurus was not undefended. Since the daring raid of the pirate, Iron Scarr, ten years ago—when the patrol had refused its aid until after Taurus had been looted—Dr. Bull had spent millions to build two massive forts, at the little world's poles. Their twenty-four-inch rifles were capable of dropping shells on Earth itself.

Berg gulped apprehensively. "Our range-finders have identified the cruiser, sir. It's the *Valiant*."

Dr. Bull turned a little pale. Coming from over the graviscreen, he staggered violently to the full attraction of the generators, and caught himself against the crystal wall. He stared at Berg, dripping and gasping.

For the *Valiant* was the newest and mightiest cruiser of the patrol—built in direct answer to the threat of Dr. Bull's two forts. Her rifles were also twenty-four-inch. The two thousand feet of her armored length exactly equaled the diameter of Taurus. She was invincible and invulnerable.

Dr. Bull's trepidation lasted but a moment, however. "Get back to your post. Prepare the forts for action." He shook water out of his beard. "I'll order Carstairs to cancel all departures from the port. Mustn't let the suckers be scared away. I'm going to speak to the *Valiant*, on my own telebeam."

General Berg saluted and departed.

THE situation appeared extremely alarming to Vera Frame. But she admitted that Dr. Bull—whether she considered him as physician, actor, statesman, or warrior—was a very remarkable man. She regarded him with the confidence of love.

In the steamy luxury of the glass-and-chromium bathhouse, Dr. Bull took a quick hot and cold shower, and slipped into the scarlet-and-silver of the Captain-General of the Planeteers. He refused to be thrown into a panic, but he was alarmed.

He couldn't understand the menacing approach of the *Valiant*.

The IMA and the ICC, true, were yammering for his scalp—but they had yammered in vain for thirteen years. The patrol had been alarmed by the construction of his two powerful forts, covering in their theoretical range both Earth and the impregnable patrol base on the summits of the Moon's Appenines. But Dr. Bull, with his fountain of millions, had deftly developed and exploited the venality existing in the patrol.

"If Batson has crossed me," he mut-

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tered, "I'll raise a stench with TAU that will smoke him out of the base like a rat out of a hole." Batson was commander of the Appenine Base, and virtually a silent partner in Dr. Bull's far-flung enterprises.

Out in the open again, striding along a palm-shaded walk toward the graceful white tower that housed the studios and main transmitter of TAU, Dr. Bull shivered with sudden realization of the vulnerability of Taurus.

The sky was almost black. Beneath it, everything was bright. Fountains glittered with the Sun. Sprays on the lawns made rainbows. Green leaves were luminous. Colored glass made the buildings into monster jewels. But the midnight sky was suddenly dead and oppressive. Dr. Bull had an unpleasant sense of the nearness of the cold forbidding mystery of space.

The *Valiant* was armored against twenty-four-inch shells. But the hospitals and hotels and casinos, the gardens and shops and warehouses, the power and atmosphere plants, TAU and the laboratories and the huge mail-order building and Dr. Bull's several luxurious dwellings—these were protected only by a few thousand feet of gaseous oxygen and helium.

Resolutely murmuring, "Imagination. Audacity. Victory," he squared his plump shoulders again, in the natty uniform, and strode briskly into the telecast tower. He paused for a moment to look up at the huge telecast receiver screen at the end of the first floor hall.

For he found new courage there.

Out of a montage of colliding planets, embattled space-craft, tremendous weird machines, and extra-terrestrial monsters, Dr. Bull's own face grinned from the screen. The beard was dyed a youthful black, and a space-helmet had replaced the glasses. An ion-gun rose in his heroic hand, flamed straight from the screen.

The announcer was saying:

"This is TAU, Dr. Bull's own independent station, on Taurus, the hub of health. Now we present—through the courtesy of Taurium and Dr. Bull's radiogenic reactivation treatment—your thrilling serial of interstellar adventure, *Captain Planeteer*. This favorite character, played by Dr. Bull himself, is based on the true facts of his own youthful adventures, in the days when he was an interplanetary exile, hunted from planet to planet by his jealous persecutors, the IMA, the ICC, and the Sun Patrol—"

Dr. Bull lifted his white-bearded chin. Captain Planeteer, in the serial, never admitted defeat. That was the spirit. Imagination, Audacity, Victory. He hurried into the private automatic elevator that whipped him up to his luxurious penthouse on top of the telecast tower.

II

PLATINUM and enamel shimmered richly. The terrace garden was bright and fragrant with blooms from several planets. Looking up at the black hostile sky, Dr. Bull shivered again. Here on Taurus he had made the dream of his life come true—but one salvo from the *Valiant* could shatter it like a bubble.

The white dome of his observatory gleamed above the garden. Already panting and perspiring, he stumbled into it, and seated himself at the long thirty-inch refractor.

He picked up a telephone, and called General Berg. There was a little delay, and a harried operator told him that a panic among the guests had jammed the system. At last Berg's voice, sounding breathless and worried, gave the *Valiant's* position.

He found it. A sleek black shadow against the silvered black of space, sliding down toward Taurus in a menacing spiral. Even at the lowest magnification, it looked huge. The details of the turrets, with jutting rifles and rocket-torpedo tubes, were alarmingly visible.

His knees were wobbling, as he hurried down to the tight-beam communicator in his penthouse office below the silver dome. He sat down in front of the screen between the staring iconoscope lenses. An engineer's crisp voice told him that the private telebeam was tuned on the cruiser's communicator.

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"Hello, Patrol-cruiser *Valiant*." He tried to swallow the shaky rasp in his throat. "Dr. Bull of Taurus, calling Patrol-cruiser—"

The prompt reply startled him:

"Hello, Bull." The voice sounded insolent and amused. "I've been waiting for you. Tune your screen to Code N-89."

With trembling fingers, Dr. Bull depressed a series of keys on the console. His small eyes blinked at the suddenly illuminated screen. The face he saw there didn't belong to any patrol officer. But he knew the massive forehead, the sullen lips, the high cheeks, the close-set, piercing eyes.

"Scarr!" he gasped.

The seamed, ray-blackened visage was grinning at him. "Yes, Bull, it's Iron Scarr." The pirate appeared to enjoy Bull's stunned bewilderment. "We've come up together, you and I. You peddled bottles of dirty water, and I cut throats in the meteor miner's dives—and your lies, Bull, probably killed more men than my ion-gun ever did.

"We came up together, Bull—and our games are still the same. Now you can hypnotize all the system with TAU, but still you peddle mud and water. I still kill men honestly, for what I want. But now, I'm looting planets."

Dr. Bull gulped again, and tried to stop the trembling of his white beard.

"You won't loot Taurus—not this time, Scarr." His voice was hoarse and desperate. "I've got a new safe, down at the core of Taurus, that even you can't open. I've got most of my valuables cached safely—elsewhere. And I've got two new forts, strong enough to fight off the *Valiant*."

Scarr flung back his iron-gray, close-cropped head. His mouth opened cavernously, and his laughter thundered from the screen.

"It isn't Taurus, Bull." The violence of laughter and voice were overdone, Dr. Bull thought uneasily. "I've come up, along with you. I have come merely to offer you an extraordinary opportunity. I need you for an ally to help me conquer and loot the Earth!"

DR. BULL'S mouth fell open. "Scarr, you're insane," he said in a dry faint whisper.

The pirate grinned. "Other great conquerors have been called crazy. I know, because once, when I lay for twelve years in a patrol prison, I devoted myself to a study of Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, the Red Nemesis, and the rest. I know how they succeeded, so far as they did, and why they failed. I have simply perfected a technique that has been three thousand years in development.

"The problems are not essentially different from those met in taking and looting a ship. The technique is necessarily more elaborate, but the reward is in proportion. There's no call, Bull, for your outraged stare. Not when you've been looting the whole system, in your own way."

On the screen, Scarr leaned forward.

"I need you, Bull." His voice was swift and persuasive. "The first principle of attack is to secure communications, and TAU is the most effective instrument of communication in the system. Time is vital. I'm going to explain in a few words what I have done, and what remains to be done to make me master of Earth. When you understand, you'll join me gladly."

Dr. Bull's eyes narrowed. "Go on."

"Conquest, by my technique, requires money, men, weapons, military skill, carefully planned fifth column cooperations, timing for surprise, scientific propaganda, and a deliberately ruthless leadership."

Dr. Bull's pink head nodded. Perhaps there was no danger to Taurus, after all. His breathing became easier. He was able to appreciate the cool application of intelligence to the solution of unusual problems.

"Money." The pirate began checking items, on his blunt scarred fingers. "You yourself, Bull, contributed nearly two hundred million dollars." Dr. Bull winced, in memory of the raid; his eyes narrowed again. "The officials of the Moon Syndicate—a reactionary group, afraid of the liberal labor movement—put up a billion more.

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"Men." Scarr tapped another hairy finger. "I had my crew, and contacts with various groups—drug runners, labor racketeers, organizers of various disaffected elements. I formed them into a disciplined secret party, the Iron Watch."

Scarr touched an emblem on his coat: a snake twined about the arms of an inverted Maltese cross.

"Weapons," he went on. "I employed research men. They developed a peculiarly virulent strain of the Mercurian lightning death—and a perfect antitoxin for it." Scarr grinned unpleasantly. "You, as a physician, are doubtless familiar with the lightning death."

DR. BULL'S rosy face had turned pale, and he tried to stop his teeth from chattering. The lightning death was the frightful disease that had denied the mineral riches of the hot planet to all save the one man in thousands who possessed a natural immunity to the virus—the fortunate few who showed a negative reaction to killed cultures could demand fabulous wages from Mercury Mines, Inc.

The preliminary symptoms were curiously slight—often no more than a mild headache. But death, invariably following exposure by six to twenty hours, caused by acute encephalitis, was as frightfully sudden as it was certain. Medicine had found no cure. Ships leaving Mercury were elaborately sterilized, returning employees of the mining company held in a long quarantine.

Dr. Bull began to feel that Scarr was going to be an extremely unpleasant ally.

"A peculiarly efficient weapon for breaking morale," commented the grinning pirate. "Because the victims seldom reveal themselves, and they can't be identified. Every man suspects that every other will kill him with a touch.

"That weapon, of course," he added, "is in addition to the guns at the Appenine Base, those of the *Valiant,* your own batteries on Taurus, and the armament in various Patrol arsenals on Earth—but I'm getting ahead of myself."

Dr. Bull swayed in the little seat before the staring iconosopes. He watched the screen, with wide and glassy eyes.

"There's no need to complete the catalog," Scarr told him. "But your old friend Batson is supplying the military skill—when a man is for sale, Bull, the best offer takes him."

Dr. Bull rubbed his eyes. "Batson?" he whispered. "Commander Batson?" In his mind he saw the Appenine Base. The barracks and magazines hewn deep into the Moon. The concealed observatories and range-finders. The armored elevator-turrets, with their great torpedo tubes and the biggest rifles ever forged. "Batson didn't give up the base?"

"The base, and the *Valiant,* too. The members of the Iron Watch were immunized against the lightning death. When the *Valiant* had landed for supplies, we released the virus through the ventilators of both the ship and the fort. Most of the men died in their sleep. Batson's men, with reenforcements that I marched through a secret tunnel from the Syndicate mines, took care of the rest."

The impact of Scarr's eyes was suddenly terrible.

"We had three prime objectives, Bull." His voice was restrained and hard. "The base. The *Valiant.* You can guess the third?"

Speechless, Dr. Bull nodded.

"Taurus is vital to our plan," the pirate told him. "First, because of its strategic military importance, with your guns commanding the Moon and the Earth and passage between them. But the vital item is TAU.

"The main transmitters at the base and aboard were sabotaged before we could take them. Control of TAU is essential, to coordinate our several secret organizations on Earth, and for the broadcast of scientific propaganda to check resistance on Earth and prevent any hostile action from the other planets."

Scarr's grin was ferocious.

"You understand, therefore, that I've got to have Taurus—intact!"

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Dr. Bull's round face was pale, but his eyes had a calculating glint. He asked shrewdly:

"What's in it for me?"

"Your life," the pirate told him. "So long as you are useful to me. I won't fail, Bull. The Iron Watch is everywhere. Nearly ten thousand important men will be seized, shot, or bombed, when I give the order over TAU." His clenched fist rose, in an alarming salute. "If you aren't with me—"

"I'M AGAINST you." Dr. Bull nodded uneasily, and licked his pale lips. "Taurus is mine, Scarr. I've fought the IMA and the ICC and the patrol, for it. If"—he gulped noisily—"if that's your best offer—I'll fight you, too."

The pirate grinned. "You can't fight. I'll give you thirty seconds."

"I don't need thirty seconds." Dr. Bull stood up before the iconoscopes, trembling in the bright uniform. "If you aren't moving out of my territorial space in thirty seconds, *my* forts will open fire."

Grinning, unalarmed, Scarr's face faded from the screen.

Dr. Bull snatched up a telephone, called his commander. "Berg!" His voice was cracked and breathless. "The *Valiant* is in the hands of pirates. Open fire with all your guns."

"Yes, Dr. Bull."

But the commander's voice sounded flat and strained. Dr. Bull suddenly wondered if the Iron Watch had organized men on Taurus also—agents could have come, among the flood of visitors; some of the officers had always spent too much in the casinos.

Apprehensively, Dr. Bull picked up the telephone again. It was dead. He dropped it, listening for the great guns. All the planetoid would tremble to their stunning recoil. But they failed to fire.

He hurried back to the telescope, found the *Valiant* again. Sliding down against the stars, it was so huge that a small part of it filled the field of the instrument. Dr. Bull stared in cold fascination at the ominous details of a jutting turret.

Still the forts didn't fire.

Dr. Bull snatched up another telephone. He shouted into it, cursed, screamed. No response. He remembered that Scarr's first principle of attack was to secure communications. Cold fear trickled down his spine.

He snapped on a convenient telescreen. That was all right. The armored world-ship of the Planeteer careered across the screen. The black-bearded hero leveled his trusty ion-guns against the traitorous IMA officials and their unholy allies, the octopus-men from the invading comet.

The film was still running, and TAU was intact—because Scarr wanted it intact. But the studio and transmitter were already isolated from the rest of Taurus. And, for all Dr. Bull knew, there might be members of the Iron Watch among the engineers or the actors and musicians in the tower itself—suddenly he regretted that his employees had not been a little more generously paid.

Increasingly agitated, Dr. Bull ran out into the terrace garden. The westering Sun struck with the same cool brightness from the purple-black sky, yet it seemed to the trembling little doctor that a deadly night had already fallen. He peered up into the blackness, but his naked eye could not find the *Valiant*.

He shrank from a fragrant breath that passed his face. The very air might already be poisoned, for all he knew, with the invisible virus of the lightning death. Even Vera Frame might have been a carrier—few victims of the insidious disease ever admitted or even realized its attack, before death struck.

Taurus supported almost the largest and certainly the most profitable hospital in the system. Above the green bright convexity of the gardens, Dr. Bull could see the white spires rising. He shivered. In a few hours the staff and the patients might all be dead—all save the immunized members of the Iron Watch.

Dr. Bull mopped at his pink forehead. Other disasters were equally possible. A single freak shot from the *Valiant*, or one

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act of sabotage by a trusted engineer, could stop the gravity generators—let air and all movables whiff outward in an instant puff of doom.

III

THE cool windless air shuddered to a heavy detonation. For one relieved instant, Dr. Bull thought that at last the forts had opened fire. In a moment, however, he realized that the explosion was in the direction of the space-port.

Apprehensively, he peered eastward across the green bulge of the golf links—Taurus had the most interesting links in the system, as TAU often informed possible visitors, because every drive carried beyond the horizon.

No more than a thousand feet away, the space-port was out of sight, below the curve. Dr. Bull could see nothing unusual. But the tiny planet quivered to a second blast. Probably, he thought, a rocket-shell. An auto-rifle chattered briefly. He heard the ominous purr of a demobilizer pellet-gun. Hoarse strained voices echoed faintly.

Open fighting, at the port!

Dr. Bull retreated nervously from the parapet that surrounded the roof, and tried to guess what had happened. The port was guarded by the Special Planeteers, a company of forty men, picked to impress visitors with their physiques and discipline. The Iron Watch must have tried to seize the port—striking, again, at communications.

But the Special Planeteers were fighting back!

Dr. Bull ran back into his penthouse office, and tried to call the port. The instrument was still dead. The Iron Watch, he supposed, had already seized the telephone office.

Aimlessly frantic, he ran back out on the terrace. The rattle of shots was nearer. In a moment he saw men coming into view, along the near horizon. He made out the silver and green of the Special Planeteers.

That was lean young Lieutenant Carstairs, commanding the retreat, taking skilful advantage of clumps of vegetation, the hazards of the golf course, and the very curve of Taurus. Dr. Bull tried to count the men with him. They seemed alarmingly few.

Brrram!

A Planeteer with an auto-rifle had climbed to the tip of a mossy projection of the stony core of Taurus, to cover the withdrawal of his comrades. The miniature peak dissolved into dust, from the blast of another titanite-loaded rocket shell.

The violent detonation jarred the roof, made Dr. Bull bite his tongue. His hands were shaking, and he felt ill. His own exposed position terrified him, but he had to see what was going on. He dropped on his knees, peered through the red blades of the potted Martian bayonet lilies.

Beyond the ragged shell-crater, he saw the rocket squad. Two crouched men running with their deadly bright projectiles. Another with the flimsy-looking firing scaffold. The corporal silently gesturing. They wore the plain silver of the fortress garrisons. Traitors.

They stopped on a green, swiftly mounted and loaded the tripod.

Dr. Bull wanted to stand up and scream a warning to Carstairs. But fear chained him, until the intense blue needle of an iron-beam stabbed from the edge of a sand trap. The shattering, deafening explosion left a black pit where the green had been. Nothing was left of the rocket squad.

THE ion-gunner checked the pursuit. Carstairs, with a little group of men, came running along the walk from green number one. He left a rifleman in a clump of flaming hibiscus. Dr. Bull stumbled into the elevator, dropped to meet him at the tower's entrance.

"Treason, sir," the lean young officer answered Dr. Bull's voiceless question. He was muddy and panting, and red showed through a torn silver sleeve. "General Berg tried to arrest me and disarm the Special Planeteers. Before we smelled a rat, he had the port surrounded. And eleven of the Specials held the arsenal and the control tower. Berg tried to buy us. Nothing to do

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but fight our way out, sir. Lost sixteen, sir. That leaves thirteen men, fit for duty. Your orders, sir?"

Dr. Bull swallowed and caught his breath.

"Good work, Lieutenant," he said hoarsely. "We'll hold the tower. I don't think they'll shell it, because they want TAU intact. It was planned for defense. The windows are lamanite. Steel shutters, with gun ports. An arsenal in the basement —here's the key."

Dr. Bull dropped the key. Carstairs picked it up, with steady, red-dripping fingers.

"Very good, sir. I'll put men at the windows, and on the roof."

Muddy, breathless men came in by twos and threes. One had a shoulder wound. Another limped. The thirteenth never came. Dr. Bull returned to the roof with Carstairs and four riflemen. The officer walked out to station his men on the parapeted terrace.

"They'll have us surrounded," he warned. "Keep your heads down, and shoot anything that moves. We can hold them off until—"

Dr. Bull heard the thin whine of a bullet, and the young lieutenant dropped beside the scarlet lilies. The hole in his forehead seemed very small, but it took no professional skill to tell that he was dead.

Stunned, Dr. Bull peered stupidly after the diminishing hum—probably the bullet still exceeded the planetoid's velocity of escape; it would fly on, forever, across the black gulf of space.

He was sick and lonely. He had depended on the loyal, fearless efficiency of Carstairs. The loss left him staggered, helpless. In that moment, he realized the utter ruthlessness of the Iron Watch, the full desperation of the situation.

"Keep your heads down." In a dull stupid voice, he repeated the dead man's words. "Shoot anything that moves. We can hold them off, until—"

Until what? Suddenly Dr. Bull became aware of his own exposed position, and retreated toward the observatory dome. Until night fell, perhaps, and the enemy assaulted by darkness? Until another traitor struck? Until the *Valiant* landed, with her thousands of the Iron Watch? Or until—

Dr. Bull refused to think of that most ghastly possibility.

STARING with unseeing eyes at the dead man, he suddenly remembered his scarlet-and-silver. The full burden was on him, now. His plump shoulders squared manfully to bear it.

"Take your places," he told the riflemen. "Watch the hospital—your lieutenant was shot from there. Hold out, men. TAU is the key to the whole situation. Defending it, you are defending your jobs and your homes and your families, Taurus and Earth, everything that matters."

Two men with auto-rifles began sniping at the hospital windows. Dr. Bull brought a rug out of his office and spread it over Carstairs. He tried not to flinch when a bullet sang by his ear. Fighting courage was good, but only a fool took needless risks. The *Audacity* of his slogan had never been physical.

Sweat made him clammy. His brain ran in aimless circles, like a trapped thing. It was already impossible to reach his yacht at the port—even if he had been willing to abandon the reward of a lifetime of Imagination, Audacity, and Victory. But the tower was a prison, as well as a citadel.

His pink hands came up, to fight off a smothering claustrophobia. That sense of buried isolation was broken, to his immense relief, by the sudden buzz of the telephone, back in his office.

"Dr. Bull?" It was General Berg. The formal courtesy in the flat rasping voice was infuriating. "I'm calling you, sir, by Commander Scarr's order."

"Damned Judas!" he gasped. "What do you want?"

"The commander is giving you an opportunity to surrender, sir. March your men out of the tower, unarmed. Leave the telecast equipment undamaged. Scarr will let you leave Taurus with your yacht, as

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many people as you want to take, and a million dollars."

Dr. Bull tried to swallow his anger. "Berg," he said hoarsely, "I'll make you another proposition. Go back to your duty. Open fire on the cruiser. And I'll give you and every man with you a million dollars a head—"

The flat voice cut in grimly: "What's your answer, sir?"

"Scarr will have it," the little doctor shouted, "inside of two minutes."

He slammed the telephone down violently. He was trembling, ill with fear. But Taurus was his private paradise. He couldn't give it up. Audacity, he breathed. Still he had a card to play.

Crouching out of view from the hospital, he climbed the steps to the observatory. His pulse was hammering. His fingers were numb and awkward, so that he could scarcely manipulate the controls. But he found the *Valiant* again, a black and deadly monster creeping down across the silver web of space.

His stiff fingers hastily slid open a concealed panel in the mount, to reveal another set of controls. For the instrument in the observatory was more than a telescope. The big lens and the oculars swung out of the way. Motors hummed quietly. A long thick cylinder of shining metal rose smoothly from under the floor, slipped into the empty tube.

If the *Valiant* had been the patrol's answer to Dr. Bull's twin forts, this was his secret answer to the *Valiant*. The telescope could be innocently pointed at any approaching space craft, but this cylinder was a torpedo.

A unique torpedo. It had cost as much as a warship. A robot-pilot steered it. The geodesic drive would give it velocity enough to evade any defense, to penetrate any armor. It was loaded with ten tons of titanite.

The finder telescopes, beside the big tube, functioned as parts of an intricate calculating range-finder. Dr. Bull brought the tiny, divided image of the cruiser together. He centered the cross hairs over the power room of the *Valiant*—he had paid Batson a high price for her plans. He set and started the silent robot-pilot.

Now—

For a moment, however, with his finger trembling on the key, Dr. Bull hesitated. His throat was dry, and blood roared in his ears. There was still time to surrender.

His white-bearded jaw set stubbornly. This battle was to the death. Imagination, Audacity, Victory—

He punched the key.

IV

WITH a sigh of displaced air, the gleaming spindle was gone. Dr. Bull wet his lips, and watched the image of the target. He saw a tiny flash of incandescence, precisely where he had aimed. A second later, a jet of white flame mushroomed from the hole in that armored flank—evidence of the cataclysm within the vessel's bowels.

Dr. Bull lingered no longer. He flung himself out of the observatory, tumbled down the steps, rolled into the shelter of the farther parapet. Retaliation came before he had caught his breath.

A rocket-shell came bellowing from the hospital roof. The observatory erupted like a volcano. The impact of eight ounces of exploding titanite struck Dr. Bull, like the fall of a gigantic, obliterating hand.

. . . Then he was lying on the long desk in his office, under where the dome had been—plaster littered the floor, but the bomb-proof ceiling had held. He moved feebly, stifled a groan. Adhesive and bandage covered minor contusions. Something throbbed in his head, like the slow roll of a muffled, distant drum.

He tried to smile, into the blond nurse's pale, frightened face. In her starched white, Vera Frame was still luscious. He wondered why she had risked her life to enter this beleaguered tower. Women always amazed him.

Wanly she answered his smile, whispering: "Imagination, doctor! Audacity—and Victory!"

Dr. Bull didn't hear. He was taking

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stock of the damage. No bones broken. He could move without much pain. The shell's concussion had simply knocked him out—the air-wave from a few pounds of titanite could be deadly as a falling mountain.

But that far-off drum boomed slowly.

Dr. Bull had devoted more effort to telecast dramatics, vaudeville mimicry, and psychological salesmanship, than he had to the actual science of medicine. The diplomas on the wall had been bought with endowments. But he could diagnose that drumming.

It was the Mercurian lightning death.

A blackness drowned him. His body felt numb and clammy, as if it were already dead. A terrible constriction of terror closed his throat. He couldn't swallow, couldn't speak, could hardly even breathe.

The lightning death!

Perhaps the rocket-shell had been deliberately contaminated with the virus. Perhaps he had received it from some enemy within the tower—even from Vera Frame herself.

How it had come didn't matter. No medical skill could aid him. He had only a few hours to live. Probably there wouldn't be much pain, perhaps nothing more than the warning throb. But he was doomed.

Imagination, Audacity—

Vera's whisper sank at last into his stricken consciousness. It was too late for Victory. But he sat up shakily on the edge of the desk. She steadied his arm. He tried to swallow the dryness in his throat, and asked faintly:

"We're holding out?"

She nodded. "The men think we're safe till dark—two hours. Can you stand up? There's a telebeam call for you. General Berg has arranged it, with the warship."

That traitor! No good could come of such a telebeam call.

The drumming was louder in the little doctor's ears. Had the torpedo failed, after all? He stood up, uncertainly. Vera helped him across to the seat in front of the little screen and the two staring ikes.

HE TRIED not to show his weakness. She mustn't suspect, nobody must suspect, that he had the lightning death. That would mean panic, surrender, everything lost.

Vera helped his fumbling fingers. The fluorescent screen sparkled. Shadows shaped themselves into the dark, heavy face of Iron Scarr. He wasn't grinning, now. His close-set eyes were veiled and ominous.

"Clever, Bull."

"Not clever enough—if you're still alive."

"The *Valiant* had twin power rooms," Scarr said, "with an armored bulkhead between. You burned up one, but merely shook the other."

Dr. Bull muttered explosively.

"Yes, Batson crossed you with the plans," Scarr told him. "We're helpless, now. A moon of Taurus. But our repairs will be finished in two hours. We can land men—and new weapons—to take your tower at dark."

"Maybe," said Dr. Bull.

"But I want TAU, right now," the conqueror said grimly. "You know about the antigen, Bull. I am repeating my offer: your life, your yacht, and a million, in exchange for TAU, intact. Yes or no?"

Dr. Bull closed his eyes. The drumming was nearer and more rapid. The virus was already consuming the tissue of his brain. It seemed to swell against his skull. Trembling and cold, his hands pressed against his temples. He wanted to scream.

But he looked at Scarr again, and said flatly:

"That trick's too old. I remember you used to take ships with your promises—but your prisoners were always stripped and dead before you set them free. You said yourself your game hasn't changed."

Scarr's grin was wolfish. "It's your only chance, Bull."

"Maybe." Dr. Bull touched a key, swept that dark face from the screen. "Have an order passed down," he told the nurse. "Every other man report to me on the main floor in five minutes."

And she was gone.

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THE elevator took him down to meet them. Four of the Special Planeteers. Two engineers, two musicians, a crooner, an actor, equipped from the arsenal in the basement. The crooner's head was bandaged. They all looked tired and bewildered and afraid.

"Men, things are desperate."

Dr. Bull felt confidence returning, as he spoke. This was his specialty: commanding human action, with words alone. A dollar bill for a bottle of Taurium, or a life for nothing—the principles of stimulus and response held true.

"But we are fighting for more than our lives and our homes and our loved ones." He let the slightest quiver of emotion into his voice. "Earth is depending on us. Perhaps all the system. If *we* let Scarr pass, probably he will never be stopped. All history may be changed.

"But we can stop him!"

Dr. Bull paused dramatically, before those tired troubled eyes.

"I have a plan," he said slowly. "I want you to go back to your posts, and hold out for just two hours more. That will give me a chance to try it—our chance, men, to save everything worth saving."

He dropped his voice, intimately, earnestly.

"Please help me, fellows. You know that my methods have been—well, say off-trail. Now, when we stand in the shadow of death, I see that I owe a debt to mankind. Before I die"—his voice throbbed—"will you help me pay it, fellows?"

"We'll stand by you, doc."

The actor shook his hand. The crooner couldn't speak. The Special Planeteers saluted grimly. They scattered to their posts, and Vera Frame inquired:

"Doctor, what is your plan?"

"The telecaster," whispered Dr. Bull. "Of course they'll attack when we try it. But it's the only possible weapon left. If Scarr could use TAU to conquer Earth—then we can use it to conquer him!"

The throb was louder in his ears, now, and swift. It had an anvil's metal ring. Vee would have screamed and recoiled from him, if she had known. But she helped him, with her lithe and splendid strength, into the elevator.

To a string band's melancholy accompaniment, in the main studio, a large bovine woman was lowing out the unhappy words of "Barbara Allen." Dr. Bull's customers were people who liked homey, old-time music. And it was a tradition that TAU had never lost a precious minute off the air, not even during the disorder of Scarr's previous raid.

Dr. Bull burst through the sound proof door. He bowled the songstress from before the ikes, gestured to silence the fiddler, nodded at the ike-man and the sound mixer.

"Hello, all the planets!"

Racing against time, against the impact of rocket-shells against the tower, perhaps against even the final devastation of a salvo from the *Valiant's* great rifles—if they could be fired from the disabled cruiser—his voice was hoarse and strained:

"This is Dr. Bull of Taurus. Attention all patrol ships and bases, all government and police officials on Earth! A murderous uprising is now being attempted by the Iron Watch, a secret party headed by the pirate Iron Scarr and traitors in the Patrol.

"I may be cut off in a few seconds. Already the plotters have taken the Appenine Base and the *Valiant*. Taurus is attacked. We are surrounded, in TAU. Until they silence me, here are the details."

IN THAT insulated room, no crash of guns or shriek of pain was audible. But the whole room shuddered, and Dr. Bull knew that a rocket-shell had burst against the building. He gulped and hurried on:

"Commander Batson was the chief traitor. The Moon Syndicate supported the Iron Watch with a billion dollars. Scarr's men on Earth are prepared to spread the Mercurian lightning death."

The air shuddered again. The double glass wall abruptly crumbled, fell in a crashing avalanche. Abruptly the purr of pellet-guns was audible, and the rapid bark of auto-rifles.

"Listen!" shouted Dr. Bull. "You can

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hear the fighting—they're storming the tower. I'll talk as long as I can. Phone your friends to tune in TAU. Warn all government and police agencies—"

Then the studio was plunged into total darkness. There was an instant of breathless silence, then every battle-sound seemed amplified. Somewhere a man burned with an ion-beam was screaming with a thin and frightful monotony.

"It's the power, doctor," gasped the ikeman. "They've cut the line from the central station."

"We've got auxiliary power tubes in the basement," Dr. Bull reminded him. "Why don't they come on?"

The tower rocked to another crushing blast. A single shot interrupted the brief pause that followed, and the screaming man was silent. The darkness smothered Dr. Bull. He backed toward a corner of the studio, croaking:

"The lights—somebody fix the lights!"

He was afraid of the dark. The last traitor might strike beneath it. The enemy without might find entrance. The anvil of death rang louder in his brain. Every measured blow sent out sparks of fiery pain.

But he remembered that it was still day, outside the steel-shuttered building. The sounds of fighting ebbed, as if the attackers were waiting again for night. Flashlights began to cut nervous white cones for the black confusion in the studio. Dr. Bull flinched from a light in his face.

"Doctor!" It was a harassed power engineer. "The auxiliaries failed to come on because they were burned out. Sabotage. We're replacing them with spares. It will take an hour."

"Hurry, man—hurry!"

Dr. Bull's voice was faint and dry. He sat down in the program-director's folding chair. The dark room was rocking. The flickering lights spun in sickening spirals. The throb in his head was the crashing fall of a giant's feet, pursuing his desperate flight through darkness.

He felt the presence of Vera Frame beside him, dragged himself out of that chasm of vertiginous misery to face stark reality. Her flashlight showed him a black-inked teleprinter ribbon, looped in her fingers.

"Victory, doctor!"

From the tone of her voice, he knew she should have said Defeat. She held the light for him to read. He saw that the message was from the firm of Wells and Watterson, the New York attorneys who had served him brilliantly as the unofficial diplomatic corps of Taurus. The world shuddered and spun, as he read:

DR. BULL PLANET TAURUS. ADVISE YOU STOP BOGEYMAN TELECAST AT ONCE. HAVE WARNED YOU BEFORE EXCESSIVELY SENSATIONAL AND FALSE NEWS BULLETINS ENDANGER ALL OUR EFFORTS BEHALF CONTINUED GOOD INTERPLANETARY RELATIONS OF INDEPENDENT TAURUS.

SUN PATROL INCENSED AT YOUR INSANE ACCUSATIONS. DANGER COMMANDER BATSON WILL TAKE MATTERS INTO OWN HANDS AND ACTUALLY ORDER VALIANT TO BRING YOU TO YOUR SENSES. BELIEVE US DR. BULL YOU HAVE USED THIS PUBLICITY TRICK TOO OFTEN.

NO RESPONSIBLE INTELLIGENT PERSON PAYS SERIOUS ATTENTION TO TAU. NO OBJECT CREATING PANIC AMONG IGNORANT AND MISINFORMED.

OUR ASSOCIATION WITH YOU HAS BEEN PROFITABLE. HOWEVER IF THIS TELECAST IS NOT INSTANTLY STOPPED AND UNTRUTHS CORRECTED OUR CONNECTION MUST END.

V

DR. BULL'S hands were stiff and cold. The damp tape slipped out of them, and fluttered down into the darkness. The throbbing in his brain became a mocking voice that chanted:

"Wolf boy . . . wolf boy . . . wolf boy . . ."

It was true that the news policy of TAU had always been that sensational interest and tremendous signal power would make up for any possible lack of accuracy. TAU

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never made corrections, and denials made through other media seldom reached the most of its audience.

Dr. Bull looked back with a sudden and novel regret upon some of the most thrilling bulletins that TAU had telecast, such as the love-nest murder of the director of IMA—a great many meteor-miners and other isolated folk still believed that that outraged gentleman was really dead.

The dim emergency lights came on at last. Dr. Bull peered up at the face of Vera Frame, pale in the gloom. He shook his throbbing head. If Wells and Watterson didn't believe his appeal, it was certain that the indignant patrol and police officials wouldn't—only the day before, he remembered, a TAU bulletin had stated that Earth police were using patrol ships in a tremendous conspiracy to flood the system with an insidious new synthetic drug.

"Played and lost," whispered Dr. Bull.

Shoes grated on broken glass, and he turned to see a little group of defenders crowding into the studio. They were muddy, bleeding, ray-burned, power-stained. One of them, in his tattered splendor of scarlet-and-silver, came up to the chair and saluted nervously.

"What is it?" rasped Dr. Bull.

The Special Planteer gulped, twisted.

"We've come to ask you to give up, sir," he said huskily. "They keep picking us off. Only five of the Planeteers left, sir. And six of the others. Nearly all of us wounded. There's no use trying to hold out, sir."

Dr. Bull tugged uncertainly at his beard. His fat shoulders sagged, in the bright uniform. The drumming in his brain became a measured funeral roll. Perhaps the soldier was right. What did anything matter?

His dull eyes looked up again at Vera Frame. He saw the weary pallor on her face. He was watching, when the stark and frantic terror struck her. He saw the quick, desperate pressure of her hands against her temples.

In that instant, he knew, she had recognized the first onslaught of the lightning death. She had been no traitor, then. Perhaps she had even caught the pestilence from him—Dr. Bull experienced an unwonted pang of conscience.

But her pale face, in a moment, was composed again. A light seemed to shine in her eyes. Her lips tried to smile, and she murmured faintly:

"Doctor, don't forget — your three words."

Imagination, Audacity— Dr. Bull's shoulders squared again. He stood up, and calmly polished his gold frame glasses with a spotless handkerchief. His blue eyes twinkled confidently as he walked to face the little group of frightened men in the doorway.

"Hold out, men, till dark." The old magnetic power rang in his voice—the same power that had so long defied the IMA and the ICC and the patrol itself, that had fashioned the jewel of Taurus from a barren rock. "And I'll break the Iron Watch. I'll save your homes and your lives—"

There were apprehensive protests. The bandaged crooner tried to point out that the situation was quite hopeless. But Dr. Bull was used to moving men, in the face of inconvenient practical details. The discouraged defenders found themselves promising to die or conquer.

THE whole world rocked, to that throbbing in his head, as if all Taurus had been an anvil beneath some colossal hammer. But he managed to keep smiling. If the lightning death let him live another hour— The rush of details mercifully filled his mind. Once more he was in his element. He was Dr. Bull, the Planeteer.

He bustled into the basement, to encourage the engineers busy replacing the power tubes. He made a hasty, cheerful round of the tower's defenses. He sent to his office for the sound-film record of his telebeam conversations with Scarr. He rushed into the make-up department, barking staccato instructions. Regretfully fingering his snowy beard, he told the make-up barber to shave it off and make it snappy.

Fifteen minutes later, on nearby telescreens—some four years later, on the

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telecast receivers of any inhabitants of the possible worlds of Proxima Centuari—appeared the familiar, professionally smiling features of Dr. Bull, over the red outline of a bull.

As it had done every hour on the hour for thirteen years, the little doctor's crisp canned voice began to announce the glad tidings of Taurium and radiogenic reactivation. Abruptly, however, it was cut off, and his benign face dissolved into blackness.

The blackness was slashed with the bright blades of ion-beams. The silence was shattered with the crash of glass, the hurried rattle of auto-guns, the scream and the obliterating blast of a rocket-shell. Out of the breathless pause that followed, a new voice spoke:

"Hail, comrades of the Iron Watch!"

Iron Scarr's deep powerful voice was quite authentic—the sound engineers of TAU, with their frequency charts, modulators, and filters, were competent to give any actor convincing accents of anything from a bull to a cricket.

Iron Scarr's battered, high-cheeked face glared from the screen with triumphant close-set eyes. The make-up department of TAU was equally advanced, and Dr. Bull's long dramatic training had not been in vain.

"Comrades," roared Scarr, "we have won three victories. The Appenine Base is ours! The *Valiant* is ours! Now the forts of Taurus—and TAU—are in our hands! Forward to the Earth!"

Scarr raised his great hairy hand, in the clenched-fist salute—the twin ikes had been moved six inches closer together, to make five-feet-two appear a whole foot mightier.

"Unfortunately, however," the tall conqueror said, "there must be a slight delay in our plans. The glorious attack of the Iron Watch has been crippled by a cowardly stab in the back. Dr. Bull of Taurus, that infamous renegade quack, has disabled the *Valiant* with a dastardly shot fired from a torpedo tube disguised as a telescope.

"Wait, comrades—and keep your courage burning. Repairs are being rushed. The *Valiant* will be ready in two hours, to move toward her mission on Earth. Meantime, comrades, keep tuned to TAU, and await my orders for the moment of our splendid attack on the money-stuffed bureaucrats of the police, the patrol, ICC and IMA—"

Iron Scarr caught himself, gulped, hurried on:

"Dr. Bull, that notorious charlatan, will be punished for his craven stroke, as soon as he can be captured by our fearless legions of the Iron Watch. He has fled from TAU, down into the pits in which are located the gravity apparatus, and the geodesic drive that was used to steer this tiny planet toward Earth from its former orbit.

"But our Iron Watch storm troopers, under the brilliant leadership of loyal Commander Batson, aided by General Berg

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign

Of Tired Kidneys—How To Get Happy Relief

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (ADV.)

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and his splendid men from the ranks of the planeteers, are preparing to take the pits by assault. Even now they are setting charges of titanite, to demolish the locked bulkheads. Dr. Bull is cornered, like the whiskered rat he is.

"So, comrades, with imagination, with audacity, we march toward victory!"

THE conqueror paused. His massive close-clipped head nodded, as if to acknowledge unheard applause. But his seamed face turned very serious. His voice, when he resumed, was hushed and grave:

"While we wait, comrades, I am forced to communicate a matter of the utmost importance. Remember, comrades, that the Iron Watch knows no fear. Only our enemies can die! Hail, to the conquest!"

The hairy fist shook.

"However, comrades, I am compelled to inform you that our antitoxin against the Mercurian lightning death is less effective than was first announced. Our research men, working in the laboratories of the Moon Syndicate, have discovered that the period of immunity is sometimes only a few days. Re-immunization is unsuccessful.

"We believed it wise to delay this unpleasant announcement, comrades, until the wine of battle was ready to sustain your courage. Hail, comrades of the Iron Watch! Not one of you can die!"

The hairy fist again.

"Therefore, comrades, it is necessary to order you to cancel all plans to use the lightning death in our glorious attack—and to completely destroy all our stocks of the virus at once.

"When that order is carried out, comrades, tune to TAU for farther instructions. I am now going to take personal command of the assault on the pits, where Dr. Bull is barricaded. Hail, victory!"

The dark rugged visage of Iron Scarr faded from the screen. The TAU Hill Billies, uniforms and instruments hastily painted with crosses and twining snakes, began a nervous but vigorous rendition of the spaceman's ballad: *Ten Years in Iron Scarr's Crew.*

Pale and sweating under his grease paint, Dr. Bull made a hurried round of the defenses. There was now only a scattering fire from the hospital windows. But the Sun was gone from the tower, the cold dark of space crept down about it.

"The traitors outside are probably a little confused," Dr. Bull told the exhausted defenders. "But when they do find out what's going on, they won't bother any more about taking TAU intact. They'll use everything they've got. But you can hold them off, long enough. Give me twenty minutes more—and you'll all be heroes, and millionaires!"

"Dead ones!" muttered a wounded planeteer.

"But we'll hold them." It was the quiet thrilling voice of Vera Frame. Her sure white hands held a pellet gun. Scarlet, from somewhere, stained her velvet cheek. The terror in her eyes was veiled with shining courage. She moved abruptly, as if to shake off clutching death. Softly she cried:

"Victory! Doctor, that's our battle-cry!"

DR. BULL went reeling back to the studio. The anvil in his brain was ringing louder, the footfalls of racing death were nearer. He felt confused and ill. It was hard to think, hard to remember what he had planned.

But he paused at the mirror, deftly touched the make-up. . . .

On a hundred million telescreens, the long cragged face of Scarr looked tense and worried. It looked almost afraid. But the hairy fist came up in a grim defiant gesture. The voice of Scarr was hoarse and low:

"I have been with our splendid Iron Watch storm troopers, attempting to capture the pits at the core of Taurus, where Dr. Bull, the clever desperado who calls himself the Planeteer, has barricaded himself.

"Comrades, I must confess to you that a very grave situation has developed. The

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armored bulkheads are strongly defended by the survivors of Dr. Bull's Special Planeteers. Dr. Bull is in control of the important gravity apparatus, and the geodesic drive, at the core of Taurus.

"Already he has started the drive—he is swinging Taurus from its orbit about the Earth! Comrades, we can't yet predict the meaning of this move. Commander Batson is making every effort to storm the bulkheads. But the defense is stubborn.

"Our agents had reported that this geodesic equipment was dismantled and sold, ten years ago, when Dr. Bull was in desperate financial difficulties because of my first attack. But it has been rebuilt, instead, and made tremendously more powerful. Comrades, beware! This proves that a traitor exists, within the Iron Watch!"

Scarr looked quickly away, turned excitedly back to the millions.

"Comrades!" His voice was strained and rapid. "I have just received a message from Commander Batson. From the *Valiant,* which is lying disabled across the north pole of Taurus, he reports that we are being hurled toward the Moon!

"Afraid of the just punishment waiting for his long catalog of crimes against the etchics of the IMA, Dr. Bull is attempting to destroy himself, and us, by piloting Taurus into a suicidal collision with the Moon.

"Unfortunately, comrades, our brave attack on the pits has failed. Commander Batson has already retired to the *Valiant,* with his heroic Iron Watch troops. However, all is not yet lost.

"Hail, victory!"

The hairy fist saluted.

"Comrades, we are leaving a time bomb to stop the main power plant. This will cut off both the gravity generator and Dr. Bull's geodesic drive. Our insane plunge toward the Moon will be halted. Taurus will lose its atmosphere—and our mad Planeteer will perish instantly, when air pressure blows the bulkheads from the pits.

"Farewell, comrades—until Dr. Bull is dead. Aboard the *Valiant,* we can escape the cataclysm. We shall return in space suits, and repair the power plant. Keep tuned to TAU, and wait for my orders."

A hundred million screens went black.

DR. BULL stumbled drunkenly out of the studio. Darkness now had thickened around the tower. Beneath it, the last attack had come. Auto-rifles hammered furiously. Shrieking, smashing, rocket-shells hammered the shuddering building.

Out of a stunned pause, Vera Frame's calm voice rang clearly:

"Guard the halls—they're coming in!"

Dr. Bull reeled back into the studio. "Comrades!" Scarr's mighty voice was frantic. "Our last heroic effort has failed. Dr. Bull has had tremendous banks of auxiliary power tubes installed in the impregnable pits at the core of Taurus—the traitors in the Iron Watch, withholding that information, have betrayed us again.

"Betrayed us, comrades—and destroyed us!

"When we stopped the main power plant, Dr. Bull simply switched the gravity generators and the geodesic drive to these hidden tubes. The disabled *Valiant* is still held fast in the gravity field of Taurus.

"And the mad Planeteer is hurling us all at the Moon!

"Commander Batson, from the cruiser's navigation console, reports that we are going to strike the Appenine Base. Thus, in one titanic cataclysm, all our three strategic prizes—the base, the *Valiant,* and Taurus itself—will be destroyed."

Scarr's voice broke huskily.

"So, comrades, we are defeated. All the splendid heroism and the ruthless might of the Iron Watch is crushed—through the fiendish cunning of a disreputable little quack doctor. Comrades at the base, aboard the cruiser, and here on Taurus—hail and farewell!"

Scarr choked, cleared his throat.

"To those glorious men of the Iron Watch on Earth," he added huskily, "I have one final word. Now, when all is lost, I can confess to you freely that our researchers, in the matter of the Mercurian

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lightning death, were guilty of a frightful blunder.

"It appears that the serum used for immunization was manufactured from cultures of the virus which had not been completely killed. The very innoculation appears to be fatal, after a period of a few days upward. The lightning death is swiftly breaking out in those groups of the comrades first treated, at the base and aboard the *Valiant*.

"Therefore, comrades on Earth, you are advised to surrender, and seek medical attention—IMA researchers are reported to have made progress toward actual immunization. Surrender and prompt treatment, unfortunately, seem to offer your only hope to escape a horrible death."

Scarr gulped and wiped his close-set eyes.

"Again, comrades, hail and farewell! With only a few seconds of life remaining—" The iron fist clenched again. "Hail, death!"

ON A hundred million screens, Iron Scarr crashed and flamed into silent blackness. And obliterating blackness, in the studio on Taurus, dropped upon the brain of Dr. Bull. The smashing crescendo within his skull swelled to the last fury of worlds colliding. He knew that the lightning death had run its fatal course.

"Imagination," he tried to whisper. Audacity—"

He fell.

"Victory!"

After eons of struggle in a hot black jungle, where he fled in vain from the thudding drums that followed, fought the sentient rubbery vines that clutched and clung and choked him, Dr. Bull shouted that word in a voice that was surprisingly loud.

He swallowed, whispered it again, doubtfully. He was lying in a clean bed in his own hospital. The throb in his brain had incredibly ceased. He blinked unbelievingly up at Vera Frame.

"Vee?" he whispered. "You're all right? I—I thought—"

Still the thing was too horrible to say. But the tall gorgeous nurse smiled down at him, and he saw that the frightful shadow was gone from her eyes.

"You thought I had the lightning death." Her golden voice was unafraid. "And I did, doc. And so did you." Her cool fingers caught his groping, bewildered hand, squeezed quickly. "I knew you had it, all the time," she whispered. "You were wonderful, to go on."

"We—we—"

For once, he could find no words.

"The patrol squadron that arrived four hours ago brought a new serum from the IMA tropical laboratories at Panama. Doc, we're going to be all right." She stopped to kiss him. "The lightning death is conquered."

The little doctor's blue eyes twinkled. "Scarr?" he asked. "And the Iron Watch?"

The nurse's limpid eyes were shining.

"The Iron Watch just folded up," she said. "The men on the *Valiant* mutinied, and mobbed Scarr, before the squadron got here. The base was abandoned—and recaptured by three loyal men who had been hiding in cracker barrels. The Iron Watch on Earth has gone to pieces—the police were skeptical when they began to surrender and confess and accuse one another, but the evidence was convincing. It's lucky the IMA really had an antigen!"

Vera Frame caressed his hand. "The loyal patrol commanders can't quite understand how you did it, doc," she said. "Because the simplest kind of triangulation, on TAU, would have told any Iron Watch member that Taurus hadn't actually been moved out of its orbit."

Dr. Bull closed his twinkling eyes. He had spent many years perfecting a technique for causing his listeners to neglect to think of simple and common sense tests of the things he told them.

"And here, doc," the voice of Vera Frame went on. "A message just came from Wells and Watterson, in New York." Her strong deft hands raised his head on the pillow, so that he could read the teleprinter strip:

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CONGRATULATIONS CAPTAIN PLANETEER. YOUR DEFENSE OF EARTH MAGNIFICENT PUBLICITY. WELLS AND WATTERSON BEG YOU ACCEPT OUR DEEPEST APOLOGIES PREVIOUS MESSAGE. FUTURE OF INDEPENDENT TAURUS NOW SECURE. ANTICIPATE RECORD BUSINESS FOR TAURIUM AND REACTIVATION. WE REMAIN AT YOUR SERVICE ANY FUTURE DIFFICULTIES.

With a bland pink baby smile, Dr. Bull read that message twice. He asked the nurse to snap on the telecast receiver built into the ceiling. The red, reactivated bull was just fading into his own kindly, white-bearded face, cheerily greeting all the planets.

Suddenly Dr. Bull sat up in bed, ruefully fingering the unfamiliar smoothness of his rosy chin.

"Shut it off, Vee," he told the nurse. "We've got a new war on, with the IMA. Call the makeup department, and have them find a false beard for me. I'm going on TAU, right now, to tell the planets that *I* really conquered the lightning death—in spite of all the jealous claims of the IMA mossbacks at Panama—with Taurium and the radiogenic reactivation."

Don't Keed the Monkeys

TO ALL readers west of the Hudson River, this encouraging message: native New Yorkers, most of whom never saw a cow except in a picture, are going to be able to see cows and touch them. They are going to be able to chase geese, and annoy chickens, and hear the gentle staccato call of the pig in search of provender.

And all this without the aid of motion pictures, radio, or television. (In fact, they'll be able to *smell* the pigs.)

New York City is about to brush up the Bronx Zoo. Farm animals are to be provided for those cosmopolites who think milk comes out of spigots, and eggs are manufactured in electric refrigerators. Lions? Sure, they'll still be there; but everybody's seen a lion. A cow is something else.

But the wild animals are to be streamlined, too, according to New York Park Commissioner Moses' new emancipation proclamation for fauna. The plan for the next five years is to spend nearly six hundred thousand dollars on the Bronx Zoo and the Aquarium (that Mecca for all tourists who get lost south of Grant's Tomb).

Leaving the Aquarium out of it, for the moment, a good portion of that half million dollars is going to be spent *to take the animals out of the cages.*

COME to Bronx Zoo, a few years hence, and see a real lion (not a motion picture) charging at you. Stand fast and thumb your nose; for there will be a nice wide ditch between you and him. And unless that lion is a blue-ribbon dope, he won't try to leap the ditch. A month or so in the hospital, recovering from compound fractures, would do him no good whatever.

The same goes for giraffes, hippopotomuses, rhinoceroses, hyenas, and whatever else grows wild and ferocious in Africa, not to mention the other places that animals come from. Every group will have its own little back yard to play in; and mere humans, instead of providing the table d'hôte, can stand at the edge of those back yards and yawn, secure behind dikes, ditches, and moats.

But the children, as usual, get a break that turns out to be a dud. A special section is to be established for them, stocked with pet animals: rabbits, kids, lambs, baby llamas, alpacas, and stuff. Any child can pay a dime and go in; can walk right up to the animals and pet them (providing the individual animals don't object).

Of course, that will turn out just like the train that Junior got for Christmas. The present writer, for one, will be right in there with his dime, petting all the animals in sight; and if the moppets get near any of the vegetarian beasts they'll have to do it by advancing in hordes and trampling the adults who got there first.

W. Weinstock Smith.

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Crooked Caribbean Cross

By BORDEN CHASE

Confusion grew. Smooth grinned and shoved through, with Gilda behind him

Start now this exciting new story about the Fifth Column menace in South America—and what Smooth Kyle does about it

SMOOTH KYLE—ex-cabby, now special Treasury agent—has just returned from a confidential mission in Alaska, and delightedly finds himself nosing straight into trouble again.

With his shrewd and lovely companion-in-danger, GILDA GARLAND, Smooth takes on a new assignment from his chief, INSPECTOR MCNEARY: find out how RENO CORDOZA got that gun! It's an ordinary .45 automatic, of standard make—but the story behind it may be international dynamite:

For this gun was part of a consignment sold to the British Government and shipped on the *Clivedenning*—a ship that never reached England. According to McNeary's information, the *Clivedenning* was torpedoed; sank with all hands—and with this gun that has just been taken from Cordoza.

VISITING him in the Tombs, Gilda and Smooth have just persuaded Big Reno to talk when he puts on his shoes—and dies, almost instantly. A small sliver which they shake out of one shoe proves, on analysis, to have been dipped in *curare,* the deadly South American arrow poison.

So now the mystery of that .45 automatic has become more baffling.

Stopped short on this angle, Smooth checks on Big Reno's visitors in the Tombs; RAMON OBALDA, a lawyer; HYMIE GABBIT, a bail bondsman; and STEVE DREYFUS, a gambler who had not bothered to open up a place in New York this season.

Meanwhile Gilda has met MARTY DOYLE, another gambler around town, to try to find out why Doyle had a fight with Cordoza recently. Smooth joins them at Lindy's and learns from Doyle that Cordoza had been working for a mysterious new gambling out-

This story began in last week's Argosy

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fit that has been taking customers away from Doyle's place and from that of TOM BENSON.

WHILE they are talking, Smooth sees Steve Drefus sitting at another table with a beautiful, dark-eyed girl. Smooth walks over and is introduced: the girl is MARIA VALERA, a native of Bolivia and a singer in the new gambling establishment Doyle has mentioned.

Dreyfus admits that he has been a kind of advisor to this new outfit, which is run by two South Americans—JOSEPH GARADO and MIGUEL PANZA. It's a strange set-up: the investment in the place is far too extravagant to allow profits—even though the games are crooked. Most of the customers are South Americans, who lose money hand over fist without the least complaint.

Things begin to tie up somewhat for Smooth. Everywhere the South American angle: Garado and Panza; Maria Valera; Obalda, the lawyer who visited Cordoza twice before his death; the *curare*.

And to cap it all, McNeary tells Smooth that Bolivia, which produces one-fourth of the world's supply of tin, is of extreme interest to Washington. Living there are fewer than five hundred Americans—and more than three thousand Germans.

HOPPING over to Martell's place on Madison Avenue—where the new set-up is located—Smooth tries to shake Gilda, fearful that she will walk in on trouble. But Gilda is too fast for him; leaves word with the cab driver that she will meet him there.

At Martell's he is taken in hand by Steve Dreyfus, who introduces him to Garado. Smooth notes that many of the richly-dressed people there are Latins; but that some of them are obviously Nordic and speak in a guttural Spanish.

With Maria he goes into the card room, where the play is obviously for big stakes; and while they are there CLIPPER DELF, whom Smooth has tipped off previously, arrives and announces that this is a stickup.

A customer starts the shooting; but suddenly there is a light puff of quickly expelled air—then another—and Clipper Delf's men start crumpling under an attack of little feathered darts. Clipper shoots at the source, and kills a waiter who has been using a blowgun.

Smooth's gun is out now, but Maria catches his arm. "No!" she cries. "Keep back—they use *curare!*"

"Then," says Smooth, "it's time they learned better manners." . . .

CHAPTER VII

HAVE SOME POISON

HE LIFTED his gun and tried a fast one at another waiter who was holding a tube to his mouth. The man doubled.

Smooth started toward a heavily draped window. His foot tangled with one of Maria's and a small hand pushed hard against his shoulder, throwing him off balance. He staggered, tried to recover and fell full length.

A dart spun past his face and Smooth saw a thin, bamboo tube draw back behind the drapes.

He steadied his elbow on the floor and tossed three quick ones at the curtains. They bulged outward and a waiter walked stupidly from behind them, feeling his way like a blind man for three steps. Then he turned and dropped.

Smooth gathered his feet beneath him and spun to face Maria Valera. She was pulling a dart from the soft folds of her green chiffon dress, just above her right knee. Her full lips had gone thin and she held one hand stretched toward Smooth.

"Your knife, *señor!* Quickly!" she cried. "*Por Dios!* Your knife!"

Something in her voice killed any words that might have come to Smooth's tongue. He dipped into his pocket, took out a serviceable penknife and opened it.

Maria snatched the blade from his hand. The skirt of her dress was drawn above her knee, showing a small, dark mark on the olive-tinted skin. Maria caught the surrounding surface between a thumb and forefinger, lifted it and made a slashing cut with the knife.

Smooth winced. He hadn't expected this. Hadn't thought this dark-eyed girl would deliberately cut away the wound in her leg.

But Maria's hands were fast. Again the blade cut deeply and Smooth saw the color drain from the girl's face. Automatically he drew his handkerchief and reached forward to stop the flow of blood. Maria jerked his hand away.

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"Let it bleed!" she cried. "Quick! Come with me!"

She caught his arm and ran along the hall. Men from the card room were running toward them but she pushed them aside. Smooth helped, swinging his gun against the jaws of two dark-faced men who tried to block the passage.

Maria twisted the handle of a door at the far end. It opened and she beckoned to Smooth. Wondering what was coming next, he followed her into the room and waited until she had turned the key in the lock.

HE GLANCED at the furnishings: a make-up table like that found in a theatrical dressing room, a divan and easy chairs, draped French doors and a heavily rugged floor.

Maria limped to the divan and seated herself. The folds of her dress were stained and her lips carried the marks of her even teeth. She looked at Smooth.

"My dressing room," she said. "Watch the door to the roof. One could come and shoot *curare* there." She tried for a smile. "Do as Maria says and—maybe you live."

"Never mind me," said Smooth. "What do we do about that leg?"

"It can be bound now,' she said and pointed to a drawer of the make-up table. "A towel, please—and a stocking."

"And then a hospital," said Smooth as he opened the drawer and took out a towel. "I don't know why you took that one for me—but thanks." He watched Maria apply a rough bandage to the wound. "Are you sure you've got the poison out of that cut?"

"Very sure," said Maria.

"How can you tell?"

"I am alive," she answered simply. "*Curare* kills in seconds—not minutes."

The guns in the big room had stopped for a time but now there was another sudden flurry of shots. Smooth frowned. Things were breaking fast. Faster than he had expected.

True, he had asked for trouble. That was his routine method of starting a case; his routine method of finishing it, too. Smooth Kyle made no pretense at being a detective. Deduction was something he read about in stories.

Right now, his job was to learn where Big Reno had secured a gun that was supposed to be at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. Reno was dead. But the men he had worked for were running this gambling outfit for a crowd of South American spenders.

Naturally Garado and Panza wouldn't talk. Neither would Steve Dreyfus, for all his clever pretense. Therefore Smooth had used the only system he knew: he had tossed a monkey wrench into the gears.

The wrench happened to be Clipper Delf, a fast-moving gunman who preyed upon gamblers. Smooth figured something would break when Clipper started to work. And he had been right.

Now it was up to him to follow any lead that resulted from the free-for-all taking place in the big room.

But Maria Valera was a problem. The South American waiter who tried to spot Smooth with one of those *curare*-tipped darts would have made the grade but for this dark-haired girl facing Smooth on the divan. Why had she saved him?

Definitely, she was working for Garado. Smooth tried to add up the score and drew a blank. He turned to the dark girl.

"Steve Dreyfus told you about my job?" he asked quickly.

"Yes," said Maria.

"And you know I didn't come up here tonight to try my luck at a wheel?"

"I know."

"You do, eh? Well, what else do you know, dark eyes?"

"I know my leg hurts badly," said Maria. "Do you mind if I—rest—a little?"

SHE swayed slightly and Smooth put an arm about her. Her head rested upon his shoulder and she smiled. It was a tired smile, but not a frightened one.

Her blue-black hair had been touched with perfume and the exotic fragrance of

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some tropical bloom came pleasantly to Smooth's nostrils. He drew a deep breath. Maria Valera was very lovely to look at. She was very lovely to hold in your arms.

Under other circumstances Smooth could have stood quite a bit of this. But now he was worried about the self-inflicted wound in her leg. And he was more than curious about what was happening in the outer room.

He looked down at Maria and her lips moved slightly.

"What are you saying?" he asked.

"I say this is vary nice," she whispered. "When I first see you tonight, I say to myself, 'Maria, look out for that man. He is dangerous man. Maybe you like him too much.' That is what I say, and I am right—no?"

Smooth sighed. "Things were going nicely up to now." He attempted to take his arm away but Maria moved closer. "Suppose we get organized, dark eyes? What have I got that you want?"

Maria laughed and sat erect. "You are vary funny, Señor Smooth." She winced and put one hand to the bandaged leg. "You have nothing Maria wants."

"Then why—"

"Maybe Maria likes the way you smile," she said, and turned to put both hands against his cheeks.

Smooth looked past her shoulder and saw the drapes opening slowly.

"Am I intruding?" asked a contralto voice. And Gilda pushed the drapes further aside.

"Now how did you get in?" asked Smooth quietly. "Don't you know there are guys shooting poison in fourteen directions?"

"Apparently," said Gilda, "some of it leaked in here by mistake." She looked casually at Maria. "Well, if it isn't our little number from the tropics. My, but you Latins work fast!"

Smooth stood up and shook his head wearily. "Look, beautiful, Maria just did me a big favor and—"

"So that's what they call it in South America?"

"Be nice!"

"But I am nice," said Gilda. She walked to the make-up table and glanced into the mirror. "Of course, if you like them dark—"

Smooth turned to Maria. "Show her your leg, dark eyes. The lady is hard to convince!"

"Oh, I'll take your word for it," said Gilda quickly. "I haven't the slightest doubt that Maria has very beautiful legs."

Maria's smile was wise. "Yes—very beautiful. Señor Smooth thinks so, too. He tells me so, himself."

"Now wait!" cried Smooth. "A laugh is a laugh, Maria, but you're playing with dynamite!"

"But I like to play with dynamite," said Maria quietly. "And you think Maria's legs are pretty—no?"

"That's not the point!" said Smooth desperately. "Gilda thinks that—well, she thinks—"

"So?" said Maria, and made big eyes. "What does she think?"

"Yes, handsome," said Gilda evenly. "What do I think?"

"Lay off—both of you!" begged Smooth. "Guys are getting killed all over the place, and you two are asking me riddles!" He turned to Gilda. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"The same to you, toots," said Gilda, and again she glanced at Maria. "Or should I ask?"

SMOOTH bent and grabbed the hem of Maria's skirt. He lifted it above her knees and turned to Gilda. "This kid from the tropics just saved me from getting a a poisoned dart in my chin! She collected it for me—took it in the leg. Then she sliced the wound open to get rid of the poison!"

Gilda's eyes widened and she bent to look at the wound in Maria's leg, moving the improvised bandage.

"That's a mean one and it needs a doctor." She turned to Smooth. "No use trying to get her out now. The cops will be here in a few minutes and so will an

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ambulance. Grab an interne ar[illegible]ring him in."

"Check," said Smooth.

He opened the door and hurried along the passage. Five of Clipper's men were down in the big room. So was every dark-faced waiter who had worked for Garado and Panza.

For a time the *curare*-tipped darts had puzzled the New York gunmen. But once they realized what was happening Clipper and his men had made short work of the waiters with the blow-guns. Then they had run for the elevators.

The players were still huddled against the walls. Smooth knew they had been searched for guns by Clipper's men. He glanced at the tables. No guns there. He bent beside one of the silent waiters.

The man was holding a short bamboo tube in one clenched hand. A small cup-like affair in his coat pocket held a half-dozen feathered darts. But the man had no gun. Neither had any of the others.

Smooth wished he had not followed Maria to her dressing room. That had been stupid. But at the time he hadn't stopped to think. Hadn't stopped to do anything but try to help this girl who had prevented him from being killed.

Now he must try to pick up where he had left off. Steve Dreyfus was first. Smooth wanted him. Wanted Garado, too. Neither was in the large room and Smooth started toward the garden. He reached the door and found Clipper Delf standing there, holding an automatic.

"Why the cross?" asked Clipper quietly.

"Cross?" said Smooth. "Come again."

Clipper motioned toward the elevator at the far side of the garden. "No dice," he said. "The thing is dead."

"Didn't you leave men downstairs to watch the door and the basement?"

Clipper's smile was flat. "I know my trade. There were two men down there."

Smooth jerked a thumb toward the hall. "How about the stairs?"

Clipper shook his head. "Whoever got the men below is smart enough to be covering the stairs. If we try to use them we walk into lead." He lifted the automatic slightly. "Think fast, pal—then come up with a good answer."

"I'll pass," said Smooth, and he shrugged. 'If you think it's a cross—it's your play, Clipper."

CLIPPER Delf had lost his indolent manner. He stood balanced on his toes, his head cocked to one side as he listened to the wail of a police car siren lifting from the street below. The last of his men, Drummer Malkus and Thank-you Daly, hurried across the garden and joined him. They, too, looked at Smooth in evident bewilderment.

"How come, Smooth?" said Malkus. "Why the cross?"

"It wasn't a cross, Drummer," said Smooth. "Sure, I expected a fight. I didn't tip you guys to this place because I like the shape of your ears. I wanted something. I still do!"

"What is it?" asked Clipper. "Better make it fast. Things are going to start spinning when the cops arrive. None of us can afford a pinch—and you're going to be the first to catch one in the chest!"

"I can't hate you for that," said Smooth evenly.

"What is it you're after?" asked Clipper. He was puzzled.

"A lead," said Smooth. "I'm looking for a gun with serial numbers close to the one I have in my pocket."

"Why?"

"It's a long story, Clipper. The cops will be here before I finish it."

"That's going to be just too bad for you."

"Then why not be smart and let me show you a way out?"

Clipper grinned. "That suits me—so long as you keep in front." He turned to Drummer and Thank-you. "Did you pick up any guns during the scramble?"

"Three," said Malkus. "I'm heavy with them."

"I've got two," said Thank-you. "And very nice ones, I might add. Very nice, indeed."

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"Show them to Smooth," said Clipper.

Drummer Malkus took two revolvers and an automatic from his coat pockets. Smooth waved the revolvers aside and glanced at the automatic.

It was a different make from that which Big Reno had carried. So were the guns Thank-you Daly had collected. And Smooth had drawn another blank.

He turned, motioned to the men and hurried along the passage.

"Any of you see Steve Dreyfus after the party started?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Only for a moment,' said Clipper. He kept his gun leveled at the small of Smooth's back. "He was with a short, dark man—looked like money."

"That was Garado, the owner," said Smooth. "What happened to him?"

"He flew away on a sea gull!" snapped Drummer Malkus. "Never mind the conversation, pal. How do we leave this joint?"

"Don't crowd me," Smooth grinned. He twisted the knob of Maria's door and turned to Clipper. "Be right with you."

He stepped into the room, followed closely by the others. The place was a wreck. Maria Valera was gone and Gilda was stretched at full length on the divan. One arm hung limply with the hand resting upon the floor. The other was thrown back over her head. Gilda's eyes were closed and her hair was in disorder.

For an instant Smooth thought of the *curare*-tipped darts and his throat went tight. Forgetful of Clipper and his gun, he leaped across the room and knelt beside Gilda.

CHAPTER VIII

MAN WITH A STICK

SHE was breathing slowly. A dark bruise had discolored the skin at one temple. Smooth lifted her head, rubbed the back of her neck and slapped her lightly on the cheek.

"Gilda!" he said. "Gilda—what happened?"

Gilda moaned. One eye opened. Then the other. She looked blankly at Smooth and tried to sit up.

"What happened?" he asked again.

"Why—ask—me?" said Gilda. She blinked. "I'm a stranger in town."

"Come alive!" snapped Smooth. "Where's Maria?"

"Oh—Maria!" said Gilda. She stood and rubbed her head. "Now it comes. Dear little Maria—my pal!" She looked angrily about the room. "Nice playmates you dig up, Handsome. Why don't you see that they're housebroken before you introduce them to your friends?"

"Never mind the cracks," said Smooth. *"What happened?"*

"Hardly anything," said the angry blonde. "Maria asked me to rebandage her leg. And you know me, darling—always the Girl Scout. I started to oblige and Maria swung a fast slipper. I saw it coming, tried to duck—and woke up in Hoboken."

"Maria hit you?"

Gilda pointed to her forehead. "Does that look as if she missed?"

"But why?"

"I give up," said Gilda. "Ring up ten dollars and a set of the Britannica."

She glanced into the dressing table mirror, pushed her hair into place and rearranged her gray felt hat. The she staggered slightly and said: "Whoa! Hold everything!"

Smooth caught her arm and spun her about. He pointed to Clipper Delf and his men.

"Someone pulled a swifty," he said. "The elevator is dead and the stairs are blocked. How do we get Clipper and his men out of here?"

"Why ask me?" said Gilda.

"Because there's only one elevator, taffy-head!" said Smooth. "It's been at the top of the shaft ever since C ipper arrived. That means you came up nother way. And the stairs are blocked.'

"Marvelous!" she said. "Did you figure that out all by yourself?"

"Please, Gilda!" cried Smooth. "Let's

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move now and tell funny stories later."

Gilda smiled. "Okay, toots. Anything to make you happy."

She stepped past Clipper and his men, hurried along the hall and opened a door that lead to a large and well-equipped kitchen. The room was empty and Gilda crossed to a large refrigerator that stood solidly against one wall. Then she turned and motioned to Smooth.

"It's heavy but it moves easily," she said. "Swing it away from the wall."

Smooth put his shoulder to the oversized box. Thank-you Daly and Clipper Delf stepped forward to help but the refrigerator moved out from the wall to reveal a small opening. There was a ladder here that led down to the floor below.

Smooth motioned to Gilda and she climbed the ladder. Clipper followed, then Daly and Drummer Malkus.

"Pull the box back into place," Gilda called. "No use spoiling the gag for the next customer."

Smooth did as she directed. The refrigerator settled into place even more easily than it had moved out from the wall. Smooth climbed down the ladder.

He found himself in a large broom closet. The door was open and he saw Gilda standing with Clipper and his men in an empty kitchen, slightly smaller than the one above.

"This apartment always rents with the penthouse," she explained. "If you open the window—" Gilda paused and lifted her head. She sniffed, then looked at Smooth and grinned.

"Now what gives?" he asked.

"Perfume," said Gilda. "Your South American girl friend uses heavy scents."

"She's been here?"

"So it seems." Gilda pointed to a small blood stain on the floor. Then she moved her finger toward a cigarette butt that had been stepped upon. "No lip stick on it. Maria must have had company."

CLIPPER Delf stepped forward. "Far be it from me to intrude," he said quietly. "But this apartment house is going to be lousy with uniforms in about five minutes. Where do we go from here?"

Gilda motioned toward the window. "There's a ladder that leads down to the next roof. Keep close to the wall and you'll find an entrance to the apartment adjoining this. There's a self-service elevator one flight down that takes you to an entrance on the side street."

"Thanks, much," said Clipper. "But how do I know the cops won't be waiting?"

"You don't know," said Gilda shortly.

She walked to the window, opened it and climbed over the sill. Clipper motioned to Thank-you Daly and the dapper gunman followed. Drummer went next, then Clipper motioned to Smooth.

"After you," said Clipper.

Smooth followed the others. He hurried across the roof, listening to the ever-increasing noise in the street as additional squad cars swung into Madison Avenue. Gilda was waiting at the entrance that led to the apartment hall. Drummer had pushed the button to bring up the elevator and the doors opened as Clipper arrived.

The group stepped into the car and it lowered slowly to the street level. As the door opened Smooth crossed his fingers. Clipper Delf still mistrusted him; and if a uniformed policeman were standing in the lobby, Smooth knew Clipper's gun would start pushing slugs.

And the first of those slugs would be centered in Smooth's back.

Fortunately the hall was empty. Gilda hurried to the plate-glass doors and glanced toward the street.

"Wide open," she said. "Hope you didn't forget to bring your night's winnings, Clipper."

"Trust me to remember," said Delf. He waved his men through the doorway, then turned to look hard at Smooth. "Maybe you'd like to tell a curious guy what this is all about?"

"Tin," said Smooth. "They mine it in South America."

Clipper looked quickly at Gilda. "The man is skippy as a frog."

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The tall blonde laughed. "That's why I love him."

The gunman sighed and shook his head. "Somehow I feel as if I were right on the edge of a lot of excitement. Me—I always liked excitement. Now if this thing is as big as I think it is, please don't deal Clipper Delf out."

He turned to Smooth and put out his hand. "Sorry I had to wave a gun at you but—"

Smooth shook his hand and pointed to the door. "Better go while the going is good, Clipper. I'll look you up if I need you."

HE WAITED until the gunman had left, then took Gilda by the arm and walked to the street. A crowd had gathered at the corner in spite of the hour, and uniformed men were swarming about Madison Avenue.

A police car turned the corner and headed toward Smooth and Gilda. Before it stopped, a plainclothes man jumped to the curb and lifted his gun. He ran closer, lowered his gun and smiled.

"You in on this, Smooth?" he asked.

"Just around the edges," answered Smooth. "Tell your captain to check on all the names before he turns anyone loose. I'll be over to the house later."

"Fair enough," said the detective. He motioned to the driver and started back to the corner.

Smooth turned to Gilda. "And now, angel face—where were you on the night of January 16th?"

"It was two other guys," said Gilda.

"Be nice, or I'll put a bump on the other side of that lovely forehead! Where did you go when you left me at the Plaza?"

"*I* left *you?*"

"A technicality," said Smooth. "Where did you go?"

Gilda laughed. "The same place you went, handsome. But I stood across the street to get a better view."

"And what did you see, big eyes?"

"First," said Gilda slowly, "I saw the Lone Ranger drive up in Fisty's cab, stop at the corner and then walk down to talk with Radigan at the door. A little while after my hero had gone upstairs, I saw Clipper Delf and his boys arrive. They took over quickly and efficiently, I suppose?"

"I ask the questions, toots. You make with the answers!"

"Remarkable man!" said Gilda. "Well—after Clipper had moved in, who do you suppose drove up on their fiery steeds?"

"I give up. Who?"

"Tom Benson and Marty Doyle. And do you know, Oscar, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if they knew Clipper had gone up to take the place. Now that I recall it, Benson and Doyle were on the corner when the parade started."

"And you let them go in?" cried Smooth. "Don't you know Clipper has taken both Benson and Doyle? And don't you know those two mugs were waiting for a chance to even things? Didn't you—"

"Didn't I know they'd cause trouble?" finished Gilda. "Why, of course I did, handsome. But that's what you wanted. And if my baby wants trouble, little Gilda is the girl to dig it up for him."

Smooth moaned deeply and turned away. Tomorrow McNeary would want a report on this night's madness. And Smooth's stomach felt as if it had been on ice for a week when he thought of that report.

He checked off the facts in his mind quickly: Big Reno dead from *curare* poisoning. Steve Dreyfus and Maria Valera worked for two men called Garado and Panza. Garado was short and heavy and probably on his way to South America right now. A bunch of dark-faced waiters had shot Clipper Delf's men full of that same *curare* poison. Maria Valera had saved Smooth's life, and then had bounced a slipper off Gilda's head. Well, at least that was something!

But what progress? Instead of guns the bunch upstairs had used poison darts. What guns there were had probably been

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carried by customers. And some of those customers were undoubtedly people of importance—people who would howl loud and long until Washington took notice and cracked down on McNeary.

And now, after an hour of excitement, Smooth Kyle was standing on the sidewalk in midtown Manhattan, not one inch nearer to the people who had supplied the gun to Big Reno. He rubbed his head and wished he had an aspirin.

"WELL—what's the score, handsome?" said Gilda, who had the unfortunate habit of calling the turn.

"Zero," said Smooth. "Why don't you call it a night while I go to the house and talk with the customers?"

"Why talk with them?" asked Gilda. "If they know anything they won't talk in a police station. And if they don't know anything, why waste time?"

"Maybe you've got some better ideas?"

"Dozens of them," she motioned to a cab that had been standing half way down the street. "Don't you think it would be a good idea to know where Steve Dreyfus and his crowd went?"

Smooth didn't answer. He watched the cab pull to the curb, and he watched Fisty, the driver, stick his grinning face out from behind the meter and wink at Gilda.

"Any luck?" she asked.

"The best," said Fisty. "Step right into the office and I'll deliver you."

Gilda opened the door and motioned to Smooth. He climbed into the cab. Fisty slipped into gear, headed west and turned north on Fifth Avenue.

"Any questions?" asked Gilda.

"A million!" said Smooth.

"It's very simple, handsome. I knew the back door to Martell's place, and I realized the present owners would know it, too. So I told Fisty to park down the street. If anyone came out and yelled for a cab, he was to take the call."

"Which I done—and nicely," said Fisty over his shoulder. "Steve Dreyfus and a dame give me a hail. With them is two other chumps: a little guy with big shoulders and a tall guy."

"Garado and Panza," said Smooth quickly. "Where did they go, Fisty?"

"That's where I'm takin' you."

Gilda laughed. "Tell me I'm wonderful."

Smooth said nothing. He watched the street lights flash past as the cab paralleled Central Park. Then, when he had reached the lower limits of Harlem, Fisty turned east and drove slowly past a row of old brownstone houses.

"Just past the fire hydrant," he said, and pointed to one of the houses. "The one with the black doors."

He rolled to the corner and parked at the curb. Smooth got out, waited for Gilda and then walked back to the house. A wide flight of stone steps led to the doors that were heavily set in a brownstone arch. The windows were large and shades were drawn over the broad panes. The upper floors were dark but the basement windows were lit and shaded.

Smooth looked at the basement entrance. Usually such houses had a grilled iron gate protecting the door. This one's gate was a solid sheet of heavy metal. Smooth kept walking. He reached an apartment with an adjoining alley that led to the rear yards.

"I'll be right back," he said to Gilda, and started down the alley.

At the rear of the apartment was a tall wooden fence. Smooth found a packing case, set it against the fence and climbed over. He crossed two yards and came to the fence enclosing the back of the brownstone house. There were lights on the second floor and the shades were drawn.

Smooth waited. The sweet and pungent odor of a Cuban cigarette came to him intermingled with the sundry odors of Harlem back yards. Then he heard a quiet footstep beyond the fence.

There was a collection of boxes in the corner of the yard in which Smooth stood. Carefully, he selected the largest and placed it near the fence. He put another on top and climbed. The yards were dark

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and quiet save for an occasional sound from one of the adjoining houses.

Smooth looked over the fence. There was a man standing near the rear door. He was smoking, and in his left hand was a cane about the size of a swagger stick.

CHAPTER IX

FEATHERS FOR A LADY

SMOOTH would have shaken hands with himself if he hadn't been holding the top of the fence. A little caution had kept him from being hit with one of those *curare*-tipped darts from that little cane.

Garado and his crowd didn't intend to be caught napping. And this man in the yard was waiting for just such a visitor as Smooth—waiting with a poison-tipped dart and blow-gun.

Ten minutes later Smooth rejoined Gilda on the street.

"Any luck?" she asked.

"All bad," said Smooth. "One of those dart tossers in the yard."

"And you still want to get in?"

"Naturally," said Smooth. "Those birds will be doing plenty of talking right now." He walked slowly with Gilda toward the corner. "About ten minutes in that house and I'd know all the answers, beautiful. I'd know why Maria kept me from being killed, and I'd—"

"Maria, eh?" said Gilda slowly. "Come to think of it, I'd like to catch up with that young lady!"

She paused, looked wisely at a red-painted column that stood near a street light, and then snapped her fingers. She turned and hurried quickly toward the cab where Fisty waited.

"Now what?" asked Smooth.

"Inspiration!" said Gilda. She motioned to Fisty. "Drive up to a Hundred and Twenty-fifth, Fisty. Buy me about a dozen morning papers. Better make it two dozen."

"What ones?" asked the driver.

"Suit yourself," said Gilda. "But make it fast!"

The cab rolled and Gilda walked casually down the street, swinging her purse and smiling as if she were at peace with the world. Smooth followed. When Gilda was wearing this cat-and-the-cream expression he knew it was senseless to ask questions.

Minutes passed and Smooth saw Fisty's cab rolled into the street. It stopped and Fisty climbed out, carrying a bundle of newspapers. He looked at Gilda.

"These enough?" he asked.

"Just about," answered Gilda. She pointed to the brownstone house. "Pile them around that iron door at the basement entrance. Touch a match to them and then take a walk—but fast!"

Fisty's eyes widened. "You mean set the joint on fire?"

"Iron doesn't burn; neither does stone," said Gilda. "Do as I tell you, Fisty. Make a pretty bonfire for Gilda."

The hackman carried his bundle to the door. He opened the papers and arranged them in a neat pile. When Gilda saw the match flare she hurried to the fire alarm box, pulled the handle and opened the small red door.

Smooth waited until she had pulled the inner handle, then he laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"I give up," he said. "Why the excitement?"

"Just having fun," she answered. "The night was getting dull."

In the distance an engine siren started its long wail. Another joined it. Then another. An alarm in Harlem brings the apparatus in numbers. It brings it fast.

A uniformed policeman ran toward the box. He looked at Gilda and she pointed toward the basement of the brownstone house where the newspapers were blazing brightly.

"Fire!" she cried. "Look, officer, a fire!"

A pumper thundered to the corner. The driver looked at the policeman, nodded and swung the wheels. A hose cart followed. Then a ladder truck. Other pieces of apparatus clattered into the street as windows went up and a thousand voices called questions and answers.

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A moment before, the place had been deserted. Now it was a bedlam. Dark faces sprang out of the night. Dark men shouted and dark women screamed. A police car skidded around the corner and slammed to a stop.

"Right there, officer!" cried Gilda. She pointed. "The house is on fire!"

"We've got eyes, lady," said the uniformed man.

Smooth sighed. "Gilda, as one pal to another, would you mind letting me in on some of this? What gives?"

Gilda caught his arm and joined the crowd that was running toward the house. Firemen in slickers were kicking the blazing paper aside and looking angrily about. The iron door was open and other firemen were stamping into the lower hall. The crowd was pressing closer to the house and a half dozen police were trying to keep it in order.

It was then Smooth saw Gilda open her purse and take out a small automatic. She held the gun close to her side, pointed toward the pavement. There were three fast shots and the gun went into the purse again.

"HE'S shooting!" cried Gilda. "That man! Oooooh! He's shooting." Then in an aside to Smooth: "Push, handsome! Haven't you ever seen a riot?"

Panic gripped the people in the street. They shoved and yelled. Gilda put both hands firmly against a stout man's shoulders and pushed. He fell forward, yelling as he went down. Smooth added his bit.

Then Gilda caught him by the arm and ran forward with the crowd as it swirled toward the basement door. Confusion grew with the seconds. A dozen people were hurled in the doorway. Gilda nodded to Smooth.

"Inside, toots!" she said. "Keep pushing!"

Now Smooth grinned. He used his shoulders and feet. Gilda stayed close to him and in a moment they had reached the door.

The lower hall was a place of confusion —uniformed officers and helmeted firemen. Smooth pushed past them, followed by Gilda. There was a door under the stairs and he opened it, pulled Gilda inside and slammed the door.

He took one step in the darkness, found nothing under his foot and grabbed with both hands. Something hit him on the head. Then on the back. He felt himself turning and bumping as he fell.

A sharp toe caught him under the chin. There was a burst of fireworks and a body landed on his chest. Then all was quiet.

Smooth drew a deep breath. "The cellar steps," he gasped.

"As if I didn't know," said a voice from his chest. "A thousand places to hide, and you pick a flight of stairs!"

"Are you hurt?"

"Of course not!" said Gilda. Her voice was heavy with sarcasm. "It was just perfectly ducky. I enjoyed every step on the way down—you ape!"

"In that case," said Smooth, "would you mind climbing off my chest?"

"With what?" snapped Gilda. "I lost both legs on the trip!" She moaned and shifted her weight. "Oooh! Why didn't I go home and go to bed in the first place?"

"Sssh!" said Smooth. "Do you want those mugs to hear us?"

"So sorry," said Gilda. She put one hand on Smooth's face and gathered her knees beneath her. "When I get time I'll practice falling quietly. Oooow! Everything hurts!"

Smooth waited until she had climbed to her feet. He reached into his pocket and took out a book of matches, lit one and held it up.

"Yeah," he said. "The cellar."

"Are you surprised?"

"Nothing would surprise me tonight, angel. We might have fallen clear through to the attic."

He stood and lit a second match. There was a light bulb near the foot of the stairs and he pulled the cord attached to it. Boxes and barrels were lined against the walls and to the left was an ancient furnace. Smooth pointed to the coal bin.

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"Better grab yourself a wall, gorgeous," he said. "Someone is sure to come down here."

"If it's Maria," said Gilda, "I hope she comes down the same way I did."

SHE walked to the bin and Smooth heard her step onto the low pile of coals. He put out the light, walked across the dark cellar and joined her. While he waited for theexcitement to subside in the hall above, he slowly and gently rubbed a dozen bruises. Gilda did likewise, commenting each time her hand located a tear in the gray suit.

At length the cellar door opened and heavy boots tramped down the stairs. The light was snapped on and Smooth put an eye to a crack in the bin.

He saw a helmeted fireman looking dutifully about, and a moment later Joseph Garado came down the stairs.

"You see?" said Garado. "There is no fire—nothing! It was some drunken people outside, maybe. Yes! Drunken people with newspapers on fire. That is all."

"I guess you're right," said the fireman.

He turned and climbed the stairs. Garado looked once about the cellar, shrugged his heavy shoulders and followed, after putting out the light.

Smooth drew a deep breath and relaxed. He stepped clear of the bin and waved his hand in the darkness until he located Gilda. She followed and Smooth led her to the foot of the stairs. Both of them sat down.

Upstairs the babble of voices quieted. Smooth heard the entrance door close. One after another, various pieces of fire apparatus clattered out of the street. Other noises died, and Harlem slept again.

At times footsteps moved across the floor above. Then, they too, stopped.

"Time to go, gorgeous," said Smooth. He stood and helped Gilda to her feet. "Sure you've got everything?"

"Everything except an odd leg or two," said Gilda. She climbed the stairs quietly behind Smooth. "If you feel yourself slipping this time, please call your shots."

Smooth stopped at the head of the stair. He listened for a time and then cautiously turned the knob. The door moved and he put an eye to the crack. The lower hall was empty but there was a light in the dining room.

Smooth stepped forward carefully, walked to the room and looked in. It was empty.

"Upstairs," he whispered. "Maybe you'd better wait here."

"And have you fall on me again?" whispered Gilda. "Not a chance!"

The stairs were carpeted and as he crept toward the top Smooth heard Gilda's voice. It came from a room at the end of a dimly lit hall.

Smooth took his gun from its holster and started forward. A dozen careful steps brought him to the door. He turned and saw Gilda following, carrying her shoes in one hand and her gun in the other.

Garado had stopped talking, and now Smooth heard another voice he recognized: that of Steve Dreyfus.

"Figure it any way you want," said Dreyfus, and his voice was tense. "I still don't like it. There was a reason for that fire and my guess is Smooth Kyle knows the answer."

SMOOTH KYLE!" growled Garado. "Everything goes bad since you bring that man to the place, Steve! This other man—what you call Clipper Delf—how about him?"

"It's like I've told you," said Dreyfus. "Smooth may have tipped Clipper to the game. It's the sort of thing he'd do. But when I'd warned you about Kyle being a Fed, why did you let the men use *curare?*"

"Should I let that thief steal my money?"

"That would have been the smart thing," answered Dreyfus. "Now you're in a jam. A real one! When they learn Big Reno kicked off from *curare,* and then find Clipper's men full of darts—well, how long do you think it will take them to put that puzzle together?"

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"So what do they do?" asked Garado.

"Burn you."

"Bah! That is crazy! I did not see Reno when he dies!"

A new voice joined the discussion and Smooth felt Gilda's thumb dig into his ribs.

"You were wrong, Señor Garado," said Maria Valera. 'You should let the money go—yes."

"You!" said Garado. "Who are you to talk? If you do not be stupid, this Smooth Kyle would be dead! Out of the way!"

A fourth voice broke in: "Maria was right. Killing a few gunmen, that is nothing. Killing a Federal man—that is very bad. They would keep after us."

Smooth whispered, "That must be Panza. Wonder what he looks like?"

"Open the door and take a look," whispered Gilda. "You've got nothing to lose but your head."

As she spoke a bell rang on the floor below. The conversation in the room ended and Smooth heard a chair being pushed back. He caught Gilda's arm and hurried along the hall to the front room that served as a parlor.

A heavy pair of portieres screened the door and Smooth drew them aside. Standing quietly behind them with Gilda he heard Garado's heavy steps on the stairs. The front door opened and Garado returned with a companion.

Smooth turned and beckoned to Gilda. He blinked and looked about. Gilda was gone. In the half-light that came from the hall he started a quiet search of the room. Then he found her crouching behind another set of drapes that covered a pair of sliding doors leading to the rear room.

"This is better," she whispered. "The doors are opened a little and you can see part of the room. Squat, handsome."

SMOOTH knelt beside her. Maria Valero was seated next to a swarthy man in a light suit. Probably this was Miguel Panza, thought Smooth.

Steve Dreyfus was facing them and Garado was standing near the door. Beside him was the newcomer—a man who was short and fat and round, with a small mustache and dark eyes. He was looking intently at Maria Valera.

"You are hurt badly, *señorita?*" he asked

"*Es nada,* Señor Obalda," said the girl. "I can walk."

Obalda nodded and turned to Garado. "You have the notes, all of them?"

Garado took a heavy packet of papers from his coat pocket. He handed them to Obalda. The lawyer examined them, smiled and looked again at Garado.

"It will be best," he said slowly, "if Señor Panza keeps these until they are delivered. You, my friend, have made one mistake tonight. I do not want you to make another."

He handed the packet to Miguel Panza, and the man in the light suit stuffed it into his inner coat pocket. Garado's dark face took on a deeper shade. His eyes were angry and he stared at the lawyer.

"Mistake?" he cried. "Was I to let that thief have my money?"

Obalda lifted one shoulder in a Latin shrug. "It was a mistake," he said simply. "Still, I cannot blame you, *señor.* You were working against one of the best Federal men in the country. He was too smart for you."

"Too smart for me?" cried Garado. "Who is too smart for me?"

"Smooth Kyle," said the lawyer. "He made a trap, and you walked into it. All of you."

Gilda put her lips close to Smooth's ear and whispered "Lawyers is de cwaziest peepul, handsome. He thinks you're smart."

"That makes two of us," whispered Smooth. "Nix on the conversation, gorgeous; those people have ears."

He looked into the room again. Garado was pacing angrily, taking short powerful steps that carried him jerkily toward the door and back. Obalda had taken four booklets from his pocket. He glanced at each and then tossed them to the table.

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"These are new passports," he said. "Do not show them unless it is necessary. Leave separately and meet at the airport."

"You're coming with us?" asked Maria. She picked up the passports, glanced at them and put one in her purse.

"Not immediately," said Obalda. "I will probably join you tomorrow. I must wait here in New York for further instructions."

"Better watch your step," advised Dreyfus. "Smooth knows you were the last one to see Big Reno. He's probably looking for you right now."

"Let him look," laughed Obalda. "New York is big, and I will be gone before he can look far."

Smooth stepped back from the door and motioned to Gilda. She joined him and Smooth bent close to her.

"Scram, beautiful," he whispered. "Grab Fisty and trail Obalda when he leaves here. Don't let him get away from you. Once he's settled, phone McNeary and give him the dope. Tell him to put a couple of men on Obalda and check his calls."

"While you're doing what?" whispered Gilda.

"Following this mob of Camp Fire Girls."

"Where?"

"How do I know?" said Smooth. He started Gilda toward the stairs. "I'll call McNeary as soon as I get located. Be careful, beautiful; look out for the horse cars and bicycles."

Gilda wrinkled the tip of her nose at him and started down the stairs. Smooth covered her, watching from the upper landing while she eased the door open and stepped into the vestibule. The door closed behind her with hardly a sound and Smooth went back to his post.

He looked through the opening and saw Steve Dreyfus leave the room. A moment later Garado followed. The lawyer was next, and as he turned to go Smooth saw him look meaningly at Miguel Panza.

SMOOTH looked, too. Panza was standing next to Maria's chair. He was thin, but Smooth saw his hands were muscular. A scar ran along one jaw and curved in toward an eye that was always half closed. He was smiling at Obalda now, and his full lips were parted to show a set of even teeth.

"You will take care of everything?" asked the lawyer.

"Everything," said Panza. "I will help Señorita Valera to the airport."

"Excellent," said Obalda. He bowed to Maria. "I wish you a pleasant journey, *señorita.*"

"*Gracias, señor,*" Maria answered.

The lawyer bowed again and left the room. Miguel Panza turned and walked to a rear window, lifted the sash and leaned out. He spoke quickly in Spainsh; and Smooth remembered the man who had been on guard in the rear yard. Then Panza returned to Maria.

"You acted quickly tonight, *señorita,*" he said. "It would have been serious if Smooth Kyle had been killed. You knew he was a Federal man?"

"Of course. Señor Dreyfus told me."

"What else did Señor Dreyfus tell you?"

Maria looked up at the man who stood beside her. "Tell me? I do not understand."

"Neither do I, *señorita,*" said Panza. "There are many things I do not understand."

"Yes?"

"I would like to know how you happened to be in New York just when I needed an entertainer. Before that you were in Havana—*no es verdad?*"

"Yes, that is true," said Maria. There was bewilderment in her eyes.

"And before that—in Africa?" Panza continued.

"*Si, señor.*"

Panza nodded wisely. "Your home is in Boliva, but I can recall no entertainer by your name in that country."

Maria shrugged. "There are so many."

"Yes. Too many," said Panza.

He motioned toward a flat-nose man

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with jet hair who had just stepped into the room. Smooth shifted his position slightly and saw that this was the guard from the rear yard.

Like the waiters who had used the blow-guns at the club, the man had features not completely Latin. Smooth decided he was a half-breed, or perhaps a full-blooded Indian from some South American tribe.

He was looking blankly at Panza; and when the gambler spoke quickly in Spanish, the guard took a small feathered dart from an inner pocket of his coat.

Panza lifted it gingerly with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He turned to Maria. "So sorry, *señorita,* I am afraid of you; therefore I must do something that pains me greatly."

"But I have done nothing!" cried Maria. She tried to get her feet. "Nothing! Nothing!"

"Quien sabe?" said Panza. "I do not trust you, so—"

He held the struggling girl with one muscular hand and lifted the dart. The Indian watched without a change of expression, stepping closer in order to see better. And that was when Smooth decided there had been enough dart-tossing for one evening. He pushed open the door and lifted his gun.

"Hold it, Panza!" he said sharply.

CHAPTER X

HOW FAR TO HAVANA?

EVEN as he spoke, Smooth knew words wouldn't stop that dart. He fired once, then again. Panza jerked forward. His arms spread and he twisted as he fell.

The Indian was lifting the short, cane-like tube to his lips when Smooth swung to face him. Again Smooth knew words would be useless. He centered his gun and squeezed.

The shots were flat in the confines of the room. The guard lowered the tube, crossed both arms over his chest and fell.

"A little messy," said Smooth, "but the best we could do on short notice." He turned to Maria. "That makes us even, dark eyes."

"Señor Smooth!" cried Maria. "How—where—?"

"I slid in on a moonbeam," said Smooth.

He bent over Miguel Panza and turned out the gambler's pockets. First came the packet Obalda had given to him for safe-keeping, then some letters, two passports and a wallet. Smooth went through the other pockets quickly, found some change and a ring of keys, tossed it aside and stood to face Maria.

"We'll talk as we walk," he said quickly. "Which airport is the mob using?"

"LaGuardia Field," said Maria. She let him help her to the stairs and rested upon his arm as they hurried to the street. "You—you are going there?"

"Why not?"

Smooth glanced along the street. It was empty and he kept to the shadows as he led Maria to the corner. A cruising cab answered his hail and Smooth half-lifted Maria into the seat. Then he turned to the driver. "Over the Triborough Bridge to LaGuardia."

"Right," said the driver.

He looked back casually at his customers and grinned at the disheveled pair. But New York hackmen are used to strange passengers. The driver made no comment. Smooth rolled up the forward window and opened the packet he had taken from Panza.

"Now let's see what Santa Claus brought," he said. "An *I. O. U.* from Ferdinand Aldoza for ten grand—"

Maria caught his arm. "Please, Smooth! I sit here and my head goes crazy! What is this? How you get here?"

"Oh, that wasn't so hard." Smooth smiled at the dark-eyed girl. "I forgot to say thank you for saving my life. So—I followed you from the club to do it."

"You—" said Maria, and she laughed, "you are the one who set the fire—yes? That is so you can get in the house?"

"Good guess," said Smooth. "Not sorry, are you?"

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Maria leaned against his shoulder. "I am vary glad."

"Then suppose you toss me the answer to a few riddles. How come Panza decided to get rid of you? And how come you happened to be working for him?"

MARIA pointed to the packet. "When you read what is in there, you will know. Miguel Panza and Joseph Garado work for someone who would hurt my country. They are gamblers, and they know my countrymen like to gamble.

"So first in Africa they make a gambling place. It is closed up. They go to Havana. Then they come to New York, but always they have the same customers."

"But where do you fit?"

"Me?" said Maria, and she smiled. "My country is Bolivia. I love my country, like you love America. My friends tell me someone would hurt my country. I am a singer—not in cafes, but at my home I sing. My friends make it so I sing in cafes in LaPaz, in Sucre, then in Arica. All this is so I get to sing in the place owned by Panza and Garado."

Smooth put up his hand. Maria's slight accent made her words difficult to understand when she hurried. Smooth wanted time to piece things together.

He glanced from the window and saw the cab had started across the long bridge. That meant they would be at the airport in less than twenty minutes.

"Let's get this straight," he said. "Your home is in Bolivia. And friends told you someone was trying to hurt your country."

"Yes."

"Who are these friends—government people?"

"Some are *politicos;* all are patriots. They form the society and call it *Defendados*—how you call—the Defenders. They try to save our country from those who would take our rubber and tin and oil, from those who would make us slaves!"

"Is *that* so?' said Smooth in surprise. "And just who are these people who want to make you slaves?"

"Need you ask? Who has made slaves of the French, the Poles, the Norwegians —everyone!"

"Not quite everyone," said Smooth gently. "There are a few districts still to be heard from. Just a few!"

He looked thoughtfully from the window. McNeary had been right about Bolivia. Something was getting ready to break wide open in the land of the Southern Cross. Rubber, tin and oil—and a gun that should have been at the bottom of the ocean.

Smooth tried again to fit some of the pieces of the puzzle together. He lifted the *I. O. U.* he had taken from the packet.

"This guy Aldoza—at the club you said he was a mine owner and a politician. What is he doing in America?"

"He comes about the mine—the tin," said Maria. "I do not know quite, but I think he needs money for machinery. He tell Señor Garado he does not get the money yet, and he gives the note when he loses at gambling."

There were other notes in the packet, each signed with a South American name. Smooth showed them to Maria and the girl identified many of the owners as important business men and politicians of Bolivia and Chile. Men who had come to New York on business and pleasure.

With the notes were stock certificates, deeds to property and bonds. Evidently Garado and Panza had done quite well since they left their own country.

"How much would you say this stuff represents?" asked Smooth. "What would the payoff be?"

"Payoff?"

"Yes. How much would Garado get for this?"

Maria looked at the contents of the packet and smiled. She lifted one of the property deeds and read it.

"THIS property is worth almost nothing; it is farm country far from the railroad. The stock is for mines that are not working. And the notes—some of them can never be paid."

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"Why not?"

"Because," said Maria simply, "the men who make the notes have not so much money like Señor Aldoza. They are poor men."

"Doesn't Garado know this?"

"He must."

"Then why did he take the notes?"

"That is why I am in New York, *señor,*" said Maria. "It is what I try to find out. But now I have fail my friends."

"What about the plane?"

"It is to take us to Miami," said Maria. "We wait there until the trouble about the *curare* is over."

"Then what?"

Maria lifted one shoulder. *"Quien sabe?* Who knows, Señor Smooth? Those who work for Garado and Panza do not ask questions. They are dangerous men."

"One of them isn't," said Smooth quietly. He glanced from the cab window and saw the lights of Grand Central Parkway flashing past. "I wonder if Garado and Steve Dreyfus knew what Miguel Panza was up to?"

"About me?"

"Yes."

"Garado—maybe. I do not think Señor Dreyfus knew. He likes me."

Smooth's laugh was short. "Don't kid yourself, dark-eyes. Steve Dreyfus likes no one but Steve Dreyfus."

He rolled down the forward window and spoke to the driver: "Pull into the parking stand near the ticket office—the one to the left of the entrance."

Maria looked at Smooth. "And then what we do?"

Smooth didn't answer. He had asked himself the same question and the answer was slow in coming. Garado and Dreyfus would be waiting for Panza. How long they would wait was a question.

But Smooth guessed Steve Dreyfus wouldn't waste much time in New York—not until those killings had a chance to cool. Steve knew the Government was interested. That would make him doubly anxious to get out of town.

When the cab swung into the parking station Smooth took a five-dollar bill from his pocket and handed it to the driver.

"There's another of these waiting if you're smart," he said. "Go to the Information desk and have them page Mr. Garado on the loud speaker. When he—"

"No!" cried Maria. "He will not answer to that name. Now he uses the name Rosenberg to travel to Miami. It is the name I see on his new passport."

"Rosenberg, eh?" said Smooth. "Don't those people have enough trouble without his adding to it?" He turned to the hackman again. "Tell them to page Mr. Rosenberg. When he comes to answer the call, tell him Mr.—"

He glanced at Maria. "What name was Panza using?"

"Katz—Mr. Katz."

"How ingenious," said Smooth, and again faced the driver. "Tell him Mr. Katz has been delayed and does not want him to wait. Got that?"

"I got it," said the driver. "Page Rosenberg and tell him Katz says don't wait. And when I get back—I got a pound note."

"Check," said Smooth. "But be sure he doesn't see you come back to the cab."

The driver winked and hurried away.

MINUTES passed and Smooth sat silently next to Maria watching the gate of the parking lot. Soon the driver walked quickly across the graveled lot and opened the cab door.

"One pound, brother," he said.

"Don't rush me," said Smooth. "What did Rosenberg look like?"

The driver described Garada in detail, even to an imitation of his short steps and swinging shoulders. He told Smooth the man had seemed surprised and had talked for a moment with a companion. Then he had walked quickly to the door leading to the field.

Smooth handed the driver the five-dollar bill, helped Maria from the cab and walked with her to the Administration Building. He entered the lower rotunda

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and asked one of the clerks to direct him to the manager's office.

A short conversation with the airport manager verified Maria's story. A plane had been chartered for a direct flight to Miami. Four passengers were expected but Mr. Rosenberg and Mr. Katz had decided not to wait for the others.

"I doubt if the plane has left," said the manager. "Do you want me to have it held?"

"No," said Smooth. "I want another plane—fast!"

He showed his credentials to the manager and a moment later arrangements were made for a second chartered plane to follow the first. Smooth thanked him and turned to Maria.

"Like to come along?"

"Of course," said the girl. She had been sitting next to the official's desk. Now she clenched her teeth tightly on her lower lip and tried to stand. " We go now—yes?"

"We go now to a doctor—yes!" said Smooth. He faced the manager again. "My associate, Miss Valera, has hurt her leg rather badly. Could the dressing be changed here at the airport?"

"Certainly," said the manager.

At the infirmary a doctor examined the wound, asked a few questions and applied a temporary dressing, advising Maria to have it changed the following day.

She was still wearing the low-cut chiffon dress which was much the worse for the night's excitement. Over her shoulders was a silver fox scarf.

Smooth, too, was in need of repair. That trip down the cellar stairs had taken the elbow out of his coat and put a few new creases in his blue serge suit. However, there was little time to think about his appearance. Soon after the doctor had finished with Maria, an attendant arrived to say the plane was ready to take off.

Maria followed Smooth to the concrete apron, climbed the short steps to the twin-motored plant and seated herself next to him in the empty cabin. The pilot taxied to the wind-T, tested each motor and rolled; banked and turned south. Once clear of the city, the co-pilot opened the cabin door and joined Smooth.

"My name is Cutler—Dave Cutler," he said. "I understand we're flying Uncle Sam tonight, Mr. Kyle. Only too glad to help out, and that goes for Walter Kimble the pilot."

"Thanks a lot," said Smooth. He introduced Maria and waved hello to the man at the controls. "Try to get in touch with the plane that just left. Check on the destination and tell the pilot to inform you of any change."

"Glad to," said Cutler. He went forward and repeated the instructions to the pilot. There was a moment's delay and Cutler returned to the cabin.

"Their destination is the Miami Airport —no change. They expect to arrive about ten in the morning."

"Good enough," said Smooth. "Better get close to them. Stay behind until we get near the field, then pass and land before they do. I want to be clear of the plane when they come down."

"That will be easy," said Cutler. "I'll send instructions to the Miami Airport to hold them in the air until we come in. Any other orders?"

Smooth grinned. "Just fly steady, feller. I'm going to grab some sleep. Wake me a few minutes before we land."

SMOOTH'S sleep was troubled He dreamed Gilda was chasing him around a roulette table, tossing darts at him while Steve Dreyfus called the shots. The dream changed and this time Gilda was holding him over a flight of cellar stairs and shaking him.

He awoke to find Dave Cutler's hand on his shoulder. The co-pilot's eyes were worried.

"Yeah—what gives?" yawned Smooth. "Are we there?"

"Not quite," said Cutler. "We've passed Jacksonville and should be just west of Daytona Beach flying southeast. Instead, the plane ahead has swung due south and is flying toward Lakeland."

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Smooth came awake all in one piece.

"Did you reach the pilot and ask what he's doing?"

"We've been trying, but we get no answer."

Smooth hurried forward to the control cabin. He tapped the pilot on the shoulder and pointed to the phone. "Try again! Tell him this is an emergency and you must have an answer!"

"I've already told him," said Kimble. "He doesn't reply." He put one hand to the mouthpiece. "Calling Flight Forty-two Special—calling Flight Forty-two Special. This is Kimble of Flight Forty-three Special. Can you hear me, Deemly?"

There was a pause and the pilot repeated the message. Then he turned to Smooth. "Still no answer. He's gaining altitude. Shall I follow?"

"Yes! Don't lose him whatever you do."

"Shall I report to the Miami Airport?"

"No," Smooth answered quickly. "Keep this quiet, feller. Don't use your radio again." He pointed toward the earth that was dropping further away. "Where are we now?"

"Between Lakeland and Tampa, flying due south. This course takes us directly over Havana."

Evidently Garado and Dreyfus had decided to grab a plane for themselves. It was a long shot: one that might bring plenty of trouble buzzing around their ears. But both men were gamblers. More than likely the deal had been planned a long time before the plane was chartered.

Whatever the setup, Smooth welcomed it. Any break was a good break, just so long as it pointed south.

"Can you pick a spot where the men in the front plane can't see us?" he asked.

"The passengers?"

"Yes."

"That's easy," said the pilot. "I can sit above their tail. As long as they hold the same course, they can't see us. If they make a fast bank—"

"Why look for trouble?" Smooth laughed. He glanced again at the plane ahead. "Can you tell if the regular pilot is still at the controls?"

"I think he is," said Kimble. "That looks like Deemly's flying."

Smooth's ears clicked as the plane climbed into thinner air.

His head was growing light when Kimble leveled off and pointed below. The leading plane was clear against the map-like spread of the Florida flatlands. To the right were the blue waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

As Smooth watched, the land slipped away from beneath him and blue water took its place.

"How far to Havana?" he asked.

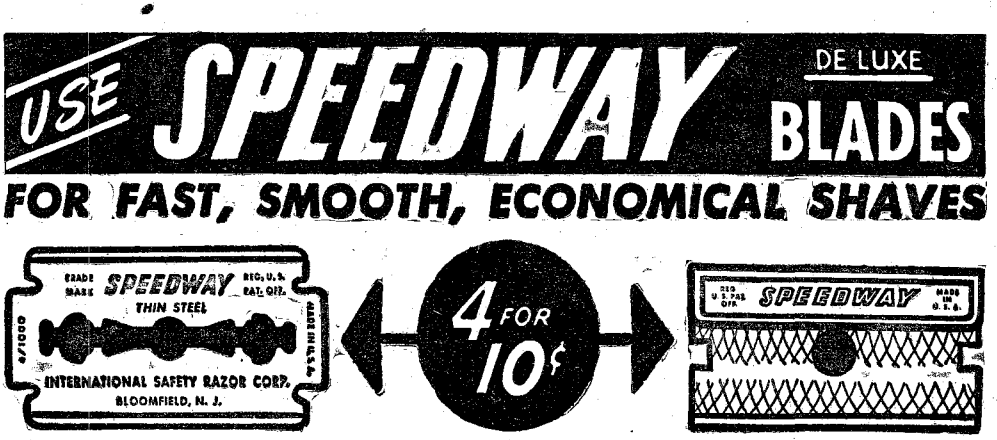
"A little under three hundred miles."

"Got enough gas?"

"That—and a little over. But Deemly hasn't any more than I have."

"Fair enough," said Smooth. "Stay with him, feller!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



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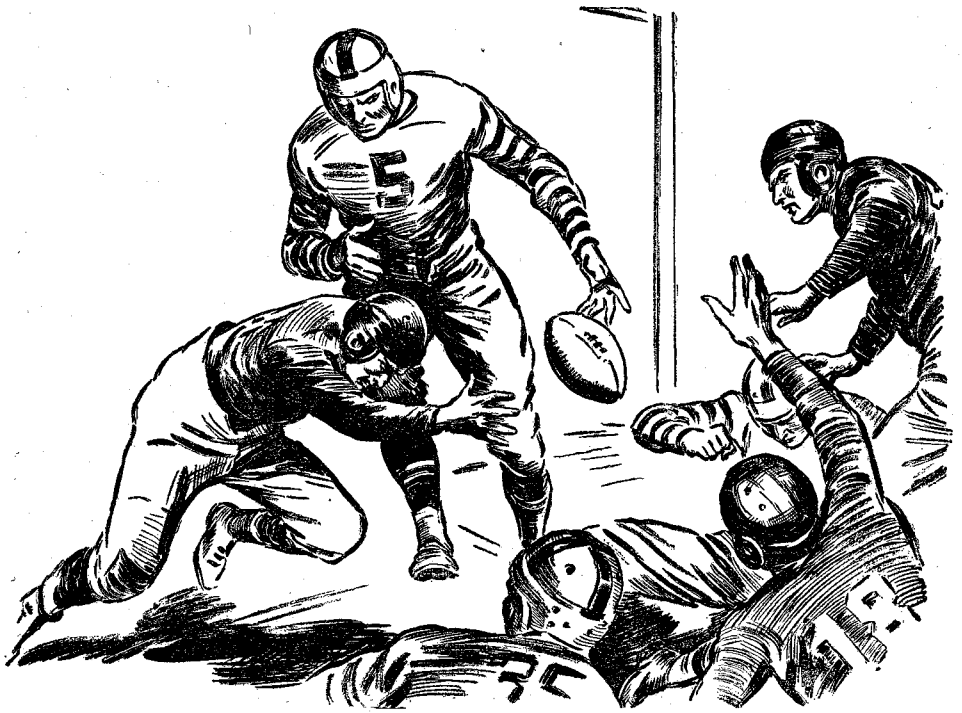
No Minutes to Go



This is a story about football, and about a college man who wouldn't play it. There probably isn't any moral here at all—unless it's that a coach can make the worst mistake of his career and still turn out a winning team

By EUSTACE COCKRELL
Author of "Reservation on Queer Street," "Second Sight," etc.

MATT WOOD, head football coach at Eastminster, got up from his desk and walked to the window. From the third-floor office in the old brick gymnasium his gaze commanded all that was Eastminster.

He looked out on the campus, his head a little bowed, his body sagging. The campus was brown in the early September sun and it was hot. It hadn't rained for a long time.

Over beyond the Administration Building he could see part of the stadium, its concrete tiers rising proudly. It was too big. It had never been filled and it had never been paid for. . . .

What if Grimes should suddenly appear walking across that campus? Lumbering, rather. Solid and fast. He'd have been an all-American tackle at a big school.

And Jughead Smith—never called a wrong one in his varsity career and he could pass 'em through a knot-hole at forty yards. Flunked out his last year and never graduated.

And Dusty Rhodes, one fifty-five, the best end he'd ever seen. Dusty had guts; he never wore any pads but shoulder pads and he never had a time out in four years.

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Matt Wood could still see his red hair flaming—going down, always coming up.

They paraded by, football players of thirty seasons. When was Dusty here? '12 to '15, that was right. A long time.

Dusty was killed in the Argonne. Jughead Smith played pro a little but it didn't pay much in those days. Wonder what ever happened to him.

And Grimes. What a tackle! Grimes had a hardware store out on the West Coast.

Matt Woods rubbed his grizzled head and sighed. It did seem sort of silly. Maybe Ames was right. It wasn't important whether you filled the stadium, whether you won any games.

Look at what was happening in Europe. That was important. It was important what they did at Washington. It was important what was happening in China. It wasn't important whether Yale won from Harvard or Eastminster won from Cameron. Maybe Ames Conroy was right.

Matt Woods still stood at the window and he still looked out over the campus but he didn't see the campus. He didn't see anything . . .

But Harry Myers was a fine man, now. He'd been a swell-headed rich kid, come to a freshwater college so he could be a big frog in a small puddle. He hadn't been. He'd been well hated. But he had made a guard. A mighty good guard. So good he never got in the papers, except when teams he'd played against named him on their all-opponents team.

Harry knew how to come out and lead interference on an end run. Harry had wound up president of the senior class and he'd given a thousand dollars on the new stadium. Was that important?

Maybe football didn't have anything to do with it. Maybe Harry just grew up. Matt Woods wished he could know.

Did football develop character, and if it did what was character? Wasn't it bad for a kid to have the rest of the campus sort of look up to him because he could hit the line or run an end? Didn't a star athlete come out of college behind the eight ball? Because unless he turned pro nobody as a rule cared whether he could run an end or sew a fine seam. They just didn't give a cuss.

AMES CONROY was right, maybe. He wanted to be a chemist. Ames was a town boy. And he was old. He was older than the boys who came to Eastminster, by two or three years. The years he'd stayed out of school and worked until his mother died.

And Ames was from the wrong side of the tracks. He'd been a great end in high school and high-spirited and ornery. But that was before his father died. Ames had carried water to the team that Harry Myers had played on.

But Ames Conroy had gone sour. Maybe Ames was right.

Still you have to try, Matt thought. You've got to try. I've got to try and build me a fooball team every fall. I can't do anything else now. I'm too old. I've *got* to think it's important and I've got to get Ames out if I'm going to have a football team.

He took out his big silver watch and looked at it. Somebody was coming across the campus, coming to see him. He walked over and sat down at his desk.

"It won't do any harm," he muttered to himself. "I don't see how it can do any harm."

The door opened and Matt Woods looked up. "Hello, Ames," he said. "How're things?"

Ames Conroy moved across the room without self-consciousness and took Matt Woods' hand. "All right," he said. "How're they with you?"

"Lousy," Matt said.

"This heat," Ames said, "it gets you on edge. A good rain and a night cool enough so you can sleep'll make the world look different."

Matt Woods was silent for a moment, then he said: "Ames, you're a senior. What are you going to do when you get out of school?"

"Coach," Ames said, "I'm going to be

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a chemist, and I'm going to be such a swell chemist that I can get a job when I get out of school."

Matt Woods walked to the window. "Come here, son," he said. "You see that campus, you see that stadium, you see it all. It doesn't amount to anything. If it disappeared it wouldn't make any difference.

"But I've got a feeling about that little campus and about Eastminster and all that stuff. And you haven't. I can't understand that."

Ames Conroy smiled and there was a little pity in his eyes. Patiently he said:

"Coach, you're right. I've paid my tuition and I worked for the money to pay it with. I couldn't afford to go to a better school and it's only good luck there are other people at this school like you. I refer to some members of the faculty. I think they're fools to waste their talents on a place like this but I know how lucky I am that they do."

Matt Woods looked out over the campus and he didn't turn to Ames. He said: "I was after you last year and the year before to come out for football. I'm after you again I need an end and I need one bad. I don't know whether you'd make the riffle or not but I'd appreciate it if you'd give it a try."

Ames Conroy didn't say anything.

"IT'S the wrong attitude for a coach to take," Matt said, "but you're not a kid. I don't have to worry about you gettin' swell headed because I try to get you out. If I said I could get you a little dough for playin' it would insult you, and anyway I can't. We don't carry anyone here because they can play football. Maybe that's the trouble."

Ames Conroy looked at the floor. "You know my history," he said evenly. "Every one in this lousy town knows my history. My father was no good and he's long dead. And now my mother's dead."

His voice rose a little. "Don't you think it ever occurred to me to want to go to college and be collegiate, and play football and go to dances and wear collegiate clothes and all that stuff? Well, I don't want to now. I guess I'm too old.

"I want to be a chemist. I want to make money when I get out of school. Maybe I'm cold-blooded but I want an education, an education that'll help me make money when I get out of school. I wouldn't waste ten minutes a day if it'd make me all-American, let alone all afternoon all fall."

"Maybe the exercise would make you so's you could think better, study better," Matt Woods said, half-heartedly. "Make you more efficient."

"Coach," Ames Conroy said. "I'm not coming out for football. I've paid my tuition. I worked for the money. I didn't come here to play, I came here to work. And that's what I'm going to do. I don't owe this school a thing."

"When you have a lot of jack," Matt Woods said, "what are you going to do with it?"

"Why . . ." Ames Conroy looked up. "What?" he asked.

"I asked you what you were going to do with all the jack after you make it?"

"I'm going to have fun," Ames said. "Live in good hotels, order people around. Eat steaks." Grimly he added: "Not what I've been doing all my life."

"Ames," Matt said, "you're a fool. I'm not going to ask you to change. But I hope you do. You're playing the Alger boy too hard. I don't want you to go rah rah but I think you ought to have some fun."

Matt Woods got up from the desk. "So long, son," he said, abruptly. "Good luck."

And he walked back to the window.

Far across and low in the southwest sky there was something visible. Then there was a sound. Suddenly in the hot still air there was a rustling of tired leaves.

A tiny funnel of dust scampered up the graveled drive that ran through the campus and dissolved itself against the pale vines that clung dispiritedly to the gymnasium.

The air was cool. Definitely cool. And

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the air was in motion. The next clap of thunder was louder. And the black clouds were rolling faster, tumbling over and over each other in furious and beautiful haste, pilling high in the western sky.

As the first tentative drop hit, Matt Woods grinned. "Yes," he said aloud, remembering Ames' prophecy, "the world does look better, Ames my lad, and I've had an idea." He walked over and picking up the phone, gave a number. . . .

"IN THE first place," Matt said, "I think we'd be doing him a favor. All work and no play, you know?"

Linda Hamilton smiled. "Why me," she asked, "with the campus soon literally crawling with better sirens than I'd ever be?"

Matt Woods grinned. "Don't be modest," he said. "And anyway, this Ames has turned out a good-looking boy since your day. I've got to have some one of some sophistication, else she would fall for *him* rather than vice versa."

Linda smiled reminiscently. "I adored him in high school," she said. "He was always so beautifully shabby and tough —and such a good athlete." Linda sighed a mock sigh. "But he never knew I existed."

"I had just talked to him when I called you," Matt Woods said. "He says it's spinach and he wants none of it, but I happened to think of you. You've been away for six years and you know your way around. If he got to kind of liking you he'd probably listen to you about giving it the old college try."

"If he never comes out of the laboratory," Linda said—but her eyes were sparkling—"how would I ever have a chance to lure him out under the harvest moon and tell him I like big strong athletes?"

"Let me think," Matt Woods said. "Let me think."

Linda smiled a little wistfully, watching him. "You care a lot about that football team, don't you?"

Matt Woods sighed. "I guess I do," he said. Then his whole face brightened.

"I got it," he said. "I'll have him over to dinner in a couple or three nights. We're old friends—he used to be the team's mascot—even if he won't come out for my team.

"You come by about ten. You come by and have the top down on your car. It'll be only natural for you to offer to take him home and it'll be a pretty night if this rain lets up by then and I think it will."

Linda grinned. "You know," she said, "you've got your nerve asking anyone to try to do what you want me to."

Matt Woods chuckled slyly. "You weren't too hard to persuade," he said. "I have a feeling you think the role has possibilities."

Linda looked out of the window. "It's quit raining now," she said. "I'll see you soon. Give me a ring the night I open." She walked to the door.

"Enrollment starts in five days," Matt Woods said. "And I sure need an end. Don't let me down."

"The Hamilton motto," Linda said as she opened the door, "is *any* means for an end."

AMES CONROY, lining up for the kick-off, felt that little cold tightening in his stomach such as he'd used to feel, and he felt his heart pounding a little in the tempo of the band's vigorous blaring.

He resented it a little bit, feeling ashamed of himself for an instant for feeling adolescent; and then he heard the whistle and was moving down his side of the field, watching the kicker, taking a half step to avoid an offside; and then he was watching the ball in the air, watching the interference form.

Then some one threw a rolling block at him and he thought only of the game.

They tried his end on the first play and Ames shifted, working on the blockers with his hands, floating; and he found a hole and dived for the runner cutting back and they were going back into punt formation, second and fifteen. The line

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backer beat him on the back, once, and he grinned.

The Eastminster tackle, playing inside of him, blocked the kick and the ball was bounding end over end and Ames was on it recovering it with a long dive. He could hear the hubbub in the stands and he grinned again, hearing himself shouting. In four plays Eastminster scored.

Six to nothing, then seven to nothing, but it wasn't as big as it looked; and before the second quarter was over Ames could feel each spot on his body that had been hit and Eastminster was battling to preserve that seven points and Ames Conroy was getting up each time a little slower.

Five minutes before the half ended Matt took him out.

Conroy bent over and the trainer pulled his jersey off over his head. Matt Woods walked down the line of benches, grinning, talking. He stopped before Conroy. "Sweet game, son," he said.

"Yeah?" Ames said, not looking up. He sat down and started unlacing his shoes. Matt Woods stared down at him a minute and then walked on.

Ames unknotted the lace in his left shoe. . . . Sweet game, eh? Lot of guts, Ames my boy. Out there wasting time when you know you should be working. Out there because of a gal. A rich gal that's just in town for a couple of months to sell the property her father left her and then she's gone.

Gone back to her world. A little New York, a little Miami, a little Lake Placid. A dash of the old home town every six years to see how the other half lives.

Be-kind-to-Conroy week! Give the boy from the wrong side of the tracks a break. Egg him into going out for football. Make a fool out of him.

Ames finished peeling off his clothes and walked into the shower.

Matt Woods stopped before him again as he was dressing. "Get a lot of sleep over the week-end," he said. "And you needn't show up Monday."

Ames Conroy looked up at him, then, and there were little lines of disgust in his face. "I've a lot of work to do over the week-end," he said. "Did I play my position today?"

Matt Woods said troubledly: "You played a sweet game, son."

"All right," Ames said. "I'll do my own sleeping." And he pulled on his jacket and walked to the door.

HE CAME out of the gym and there was the roadster. Linda called to him. He walked over, and put his foot on the running board. "Get in," she said. "You played a sweet game today, lad. I'll drive you home."

Ames climbed into the roadster. "Yes," he said, bitterly. "That's what I heard."

"You certainly did," Linda said emphatically, "and doesn't it feel grand to be in training again?"

Ames Conroy turned and looked at the profile of the girl beside him. Yes, that was it. It's worth it; what if it is only two months?

I'll take this. I'll take riding down this beautiful old drive with Linda Hamilton, looking at her, hearing her talk, being in love with her. Hopelessly in love with her and knowing it's hopeless. Even thinking sometimes when I'm away from her that she's shallow and selfish, and not caring if she is because I'm in love with her. Yes, I'll take this.

I'll take going out for football because she wants me to, knowing I can't spare the time, and when I do spare the time, stealing it at night. Coffee, black enough and strong enough, is a wonderful thing. . . .

Ames mustered up a grin. "I'm not exactly in the pink of condition," he said. "But we won a football game, anyway, and that's news at Eastminster."

"Darling," Linda said carelessly, "you played superbly. And I have a plan for us. Tomorrow we go back to nature. This is a glorious time of year for a picnic. We'll drive some place 'way away, and just sit and watch the leaves turn redder."

"But—" Ames began. Then he stopped.

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She had said *darling,* very definitely she had said *darling*. Quite casually, to be sure, and no doubt it was a common term among the people she had known these last six years. "All right," he said, trying not to sound too eager, "I think that would be swell."

Linda gave him a fleeting look. When she turned back her face wore a tiny frown, but her voice was gay. "I'll pick you up early," she said. "I'll have the victuals."

"But can't I see you tonight?" Ames asked a little doggedly.

"No, darling," Linda said. "I want you to go to bed early. You look terribly tired." She stopped the car.

"Till morning," she said. And she drove off swiftly, leaving him standing there. She didn't look back.

NO, LINDA, my girl, you didn't look back, did you? You should have looked back before that picnic with Ames Conroy. And you should have looked ahead a little, too.

You're back here in the old home town, and you've sold the house and property your father left so hopefully and you're lucky to break even. The roadster and money to live a little while in New York and you'll tramp those streets and see those theatrical agents and maybe you'll be lucky and get a bit.

But you've had one part these last two months. Your father's dear friend, Mr. Woods. He gave you a part. A bit of a lark, my dear . . . Mr. Conroy is stubborn, he won't play on my football team. He's a man instead of a boy. And there he is sitting there on your sofa, sound asleep.

Why is he sound asleep, Linda? Why, Miss Hamilton, he's sound asleep because you got him out for football with your woman's wiles and he's tried to keep his studies up and he has abandoned that good old principle of sleeping at night. He has done that a bit too long. He's got circles under his eyes and he's drawn too fine. But he plays his end of that line and he's practically a hero.

Yes, that was a part, Linda, dear Linda, and you did what the book says—you put your heart into it. . . . Now try to get it back.

There's only one more game, my dear, and dear old Eastminster is undefeated. Isn't that lovely? It's a hateful little school to do that to my darling—but it wasn't the school, it was you.

The weeks have slipped by and you haven't had the guts to tell him that he's out for football because dear Mr. Woods asked you to be a heel—and you agreed. Because you fell in love with him—and maybe he with you.

But wait till you tell him what you've done . . . and you must tell him, you know that. See how he'll look at you then. Just watch his face. Just watch his face when you tell him what you've done.

Linda Hamilton stood up softly and walked twice across the room. Her face was drawn and she blinked back two tears savagely. Then, walking to the door, she closed it softly behind her.

"HONEY," Matt Woods said, "I'm sorry. But Saturday will see it over. I can't help wanting to win that one."

"He's over at my house," Linda said. "Sound asleep. Sitting up on the sofa sound asleep. He's almost a wreck. Classes all day, football all afternoon. Keeps up the toughest course anyone ever took at this lousy school making straight A's and sees me besides. I tell you he can't stand it for another week."

"But he makes too much difference, Linda. Honest now, don't you get a kick out of seeing Ames Conroy win a football game for Eastminster?"

"That's not a fair question," Linda cried. "It's not fair to him."

"That Cameron," Matt said. "They've got a club. We'll fill the stadium with them. I haven't had an undefeated team since twenty-six. Stick a reserve in there at Ames' end and we wouldn't have a chance."

"You'd fill the stadium?" Linda said and her voice dripped sarcasm. "You

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might have an undefeated team? Isn't that swell? Isn't that important—"

"To me," Matt said, interrupting. "It is."

. . . The old ghosts walk, Grimes and Harry Myers and Jughead Smith and Dusty Rhodes and Ames Conroy. And all the others. And Ames Conroy. And you thought it was important, didn't you, Matt?

Head coach for thirty years and you'll do anything for a winning team because a winning team attracts good material and every fall you've got to build a football team, every fall until you die because you're too old to do anything else. Yes, you character builder, you . . .

"I'm sorry," Matt said. "I'll see what I can do."

LINDA sat down on the sofa and shook Ames Conroy gently by the shoulder. He sat up with a start, creasing his face into a grin. "Sorry," he said. "I must have dropped off," he added a little foolishly.

Linda stood up. "Ames," she said, "walk with me to the door."

It was dark in the hall. She'd be moving out of this house in a few days. It was cold. She opened the door. It was cold and crisp outside and she could see hard stars winking between the bare branches of the trees.

"Stand outside, Ames," she said. "I want to tell you something."

She could see his face but not clearly.

"Ames," she said . . . Now troupe, my dear. The show must go on.

"Ames," she said. "Kiss me." She moved back to where it was darker then, away from him.

She began again, flatly, "I'm an actress. I bet Matt Woods I could make you come out for football. I'm not going to see you any more. I'm leaving Sunday and I'm not coming back again. It was a frame-up, Ames. . . ."

You've got the door shut and you're standing there and your heart has ticked off a lot of seconds but he hasn't moved.

"Don't hate me." That's what your heart is ticking off and he's moved, you can hear his feet. He's going, and now he's off the porch. Don't be dramatic; nobody can see you in this hall. Don't waste it . . . don't . . . don't . . . don't . . .

AMES CONROY got up from the snow-covered ground and he noticed that a little blood was dripping from his right eyebrow. That was where the Cameron guard had stepped on him on that last play when they'd come around his end.

Ames wiped the blood away with a little snow. You cut easily when you're cold, he thought. What was he out here for, anyhow? Linda was gone and a good thing it was. A fine thing. But she was an actress, a very fine one. Superbly superb.

Linda was gone and he'd had more time for his chemistry and still time enough to play football on Matt Woods'

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did—Actually and Literally)

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 7, Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 7, Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

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beautiful undefeated team and that made everything perfectly lovely.

Except, perhaps, for the little detail that he didn't seem to be playing football . . .

The joke's on you, Matt, after all. You were a pretty cheap heel, to play a trick like that on me. And then you told me I could turn in my suit if I wanted to and I thought I'd stick it out one more week and here I am and I might as well be in the laboratory for all the good I'm doing, because the Cameron quarterback is sending every other play around my end and they're gaining.

Yes, they're gaining plenty. These boys are efficient. They function. They are very good. Their interference is superb. Superbly superb. They seem to know which end their bread is buttered on because here they come again and that guard is coming out of there and they're taking me out of this play, out of this play. . . .

Harkness got him. Another first and ten, and this is very interesting, this football. A little on the juvenile side but very interesting.

All those people doing all that screaming and sitting out in this vile weather to watch them knock old Conroy over and skip a few yards around his end and they'll probably score because I don't seem to be able to do a thing about it.

They are too good, I guess. It's first and goal. First and goal and I expect they will score over the prostrate form of old Conroy, good old Conroy; swing low sweet chariot I wonder who's kissing her now, tra la. And the gun caught them and the half is over. Tut tut.

MATT WOODS looked over at Ames where he sat on the little bench between halves. He looked played out, he thought. Probably because he was played out. He'd worked too hard and lost too much sleep and he was all in and that was that.

You could play good football, Matt knew, you could even play great football when you were all in, but you had to have something to do it on, some reason, some feeling about the team or the school or something.

Ames didn't have it and he couldn't give it to him and there wasn't anything to be done about it.

He thought, then, that he'd tell Ames that Linda was there. Linda had come back, maybe she'd never gone away. But she was there at the game, he'd seen her. He'd tell Ames that. It might make a difference. He went over to Ames and patted him on the shoulder.

Matt cleared his throat. "Son," he heard himself say, "you're played out. You've done your best, it's not your fault. I'll start you this half and then I'll send someone in. We'll all live, even if we do lose this one. No use you getting hurt."

Ames didn't look up. "Suit yourself," he said indifferently.

It was time to go back for the second half, then, and Matt went back to the bench and pulled a blanket around his shoulders. It was getting colder all the time. Eastminster kicked off.

They were coming out of their huddle, that big Cameron team. One, two, *hike*. Like a bunch of machines moving into their positions with a sort of relentlessness. They functioned, those boys did. They had power.

Sometimes the snow would fall a little thicker and he couldn't see. Maybe he didn't want to see them hammer that end, sweep those power plays around that end.

Sometimes it seemed to be Dusty Rhodes out there because Conroy wasn't wearing a helmet and he looked little with nothing but shoulder pads. But Dusty had died in the Argonne. It was Ames and they were hammering Ames.

They were hammering Ames and Ames, somehow, seemed to be holding them—they weren't gaining around his end now—but it was time to take Ames out. He'd promised him, and it was time to take him out.

"All right," Matt said to the boy beside

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him. "Go in there for Conroy. Cut down the interference, don't try to make any tackles."

Conroy was just getting up. Conroy was getting up and walking around and shaking his head as if to clear it and Jaccard the substitute was racing through the tracked snow across the field and then they could hear Ames Conroy's voice because it was so quiet and sound carries when snow is falling.

"Tell Mr. Woods to climb a tree, please, Jaccard. I'll play my position."

"The so and so," Ames said aloud; "he was going to take me out." He went into his position. He was going to take me out just like I couldn't play my end, just like maybe I wasn't good enough to play on his lousy one-horse football team. Just like those guys could gain around my end forever just because they gained awhile.

"Route one this way, stupid," Ames called to the Cameron quarterback. And he was grinning a crooked grin. The Cameron quarterback obliged.

Sift and float, and then you get in there and cut that fullback down across the knees when he goes back for the hole off tackle. Cut him from the side, right at his knees and he won't get up so fast.

"Listen," Ames said, aloud, "you ain't goin' noplace, son."

He could feel the blood roaring past his ears and there were some facilities for taking oxygen to his blood in the bottom of his lungs that hadn't had anything to do for a long time.

He felt good, with a solid energy flowing through his body and the band slashed across *On Wisconsin* but Ames Conroy fitted the bad verse that Eastminster used to the tune and that's the way he felt it.

The line backer came up and hit him on the back and he rubbed some snow across his face. They were trying, those kids in the band, and it was cold enough so that the tuba player probably couldn't take his lips off the mouthpiece of his horn when he finished this one but he was riding those *umpas* hard anyway.

"Don't you like my end?" he yelled.

MATT WOODS stood in his office and looked out the window at the roadster sitting there. Linda Hamilton's roadster.

It had been beautiful, that play. If Ames hadn't sliced in, taking a chance; if he had taken his three steps and waited, it would have been too sad.

But Ames *had* sliced and it had been beautiful. The Cameron quarter's leg had swung and Ames hadn't been able to get his hands crossed in front of his face and he'd blocked it with his chin.

It had been terrible. It had dropped him like a log and the Cameron quarter had been plenty busy getting back and falling on the ball. But still it was a safety—two great big points. . . .

That long last quarter. Power and still more power. Try that end. Try the punch-drunk end that won't get out of the game, that we gained around all the first half. That's the way they'd figured. Still, they hadn't scored . . . .

Linda Hamilton came in the door. "You wanted to see me?" she asked frostily.

"Yes," Matt said. "I was afraid you wouldn't come. You got my wire?"

"Yes."

"And you think I am a big heel because I got you to lure poor Ames out for football and then you got kind of fond of him and renounced all and told him you had lured him out—you blamed it on me?"

"Yes," Linda said. "Yes to the 'big heel' part."

"Well," Matt Wood said, "after you renounced all and told him, he didn't turn in his suit did he? When I tried to take him out today he wouldn't leave the game. You didn't have anything to do with that and neither did I.

"You know what happened to him? The old college try got him. He got all dewy-eyed and unselfish about Eastminster and so he stayed in there and played a beautiful game."

"Well," Linda began doubtfully.

"If I loved a girl I'd play football for her. I wouldn't mind. And if I was a girl that loved a boy I'd tell him so."

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Tears came to Linda's eyes and she didn't say anything for a minute.

Ames came in the door. "You wanted to see me, coach?" he asked gruffly. Then he saw Linda.

Linda turned to him; she walked over to him and put her arms around his neck and she said: "I love you, Ames."

Ames said over her head, "What the such-and-such is this?"

"I don't know," Matt said. "I just told her that if she loved you the simplest thing would be for her to tell you so." He paused. "The same thing goes for you, too, stupid."

Ames didn't say anything. He looked down at Linda's head on his chest.

"I fix it so a beautiful girl falls in love with you; I breed a little unselfishness into you with my football team and you are all set to come in here and tell me what a big heel I am," Matt said.

Ames grinned. "You are, aren't you?"

"Nope," Matt said. "I'm a football coach."

Ames nimbly thumbed his nose.

. . . Matt Woods rubbed a bigger hole in the frost on the window of his office. It's all right, all right! They are both in the car, now. Not bad, Matt, old cupid, old kid. The car is moving down the drive.

Matt threw up the window and bellowed: "Matt Woods' a lowdown louse!"

He heard them laugh.

Laugh, and the metropolitan papers laugh with you—that is if you have an undefeated team. Pretty sweet team. Some nice stories tomorrow. The Old Master. School spirit got boy, boy got girl. Nice going, coach.

I'll have some boys coming up next year. I'll have me a real club next year! We'll probably take Cameron three, four touchdowns next year.

Why, a dry field today so they could use some of those pass plays the veteran gridiron genius, grizzled Matt Woods, taught 'em, and it'd have probably been a lot worse than: Eastminster twooooooo. Cameron zeroooooo.

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Jesse James hated guns; and as soon as Emmett pulled his, he leaped

Red Snow

Five men on a dead man's map, with a quarter of a million to split between them. But the youngest man knew a trap when he saw one, and he had a Colt to call his own

By ARTHUR LAWSON

Author of "Brother Cowpoke," "Squaw Lady," etc.

I

JEFF HALEY, once known as "The Kid," turned his back on the Huntsville Penitentiary and rode straight into the sunset without once looking back. His mind was busy with what lay ahead—and his instinct told him that something was loco. The law just does not suddenly turn Santa Claus and let a man out of jail before half his term is served. Not without some good reason.

The warden had tried to explain it to him:

"We figger you learned your lesson, Jeff." But that was not the answer. "You were only a kid when you helped wreck that U. P. train and lifted the quarter million from the baggage-car safe. You didn't know what you were doing. So the governor thought it over and is giving you a pardon. Ah . . . uh—you wouldn't want to tell us now what happened to that loot and who was in on the robbery with you?"

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Jeff's lips were thin. "I guess you've asked me that five hundred times, Warden. And I've given you my answer. It was me and Goldilocks and the three bears. We went to church one day and stuck the loot in the plate when the deacon passed it. And you can take your pardon and . . ."

"I was just asking you," the warden said softly. "You're foolish, Jeff, standing up for pals who double-crossed you. You know how we caught you. Got a telegram from a party saying where we would find you." He shrugged his shoulders. "Now beat it. That pardon's still yours. A feller sent you a big bay hoss. Didn't leave his name. Yuh can pick up yore other traps downstairs. I guess the clothes won't fit yuh that yuh wore in here, but yuh might want them as souvenirs."

The warden held out his hand, grinned. "I hope yuh go straight, Jeff, for your own good—and Goldilocks'. Good luck."

Jeff knew what he meant by that crack. He held his temper. "I don't owe you a thing", Jeff said, and turned and went out.

He was free now—but it added up to a plant. Jeff had learned a lot about people when he was in the jug. Nobody gives you anything without expecting plenty in return.

A DAY'S hard ride brought him to the ford of the Navasota where he camped, stiff and galled from the unaccustomed riding. Another day and he sighted the Brazos—two more days up the brick-red stream brought him to the booming city of Waco. The railroad had come through since he had been away. It had changed everything. There were more farmers in the streets, and less cattlemen; and he wondered if he would find the same thing true on his own home range.

Where the Bosque and the Brazos meet, he turned to the rolling prairies to the west. It was many days later before he turned up at Peaceful where the Canadian River skirts the bluffs leading up to the Staked Plains. Here five years had scarcely left a mark.

The sun was a fading red streak when he got down in front of the schoolhouse. He looked along the road. Seeing nobody, he stepped inside. The golden-haired girl sitting alone at the teacher's desk glanced up, trying to see beyond the ring of light around her.

"Hello, Greta!"

Jeff shivered as he closed the door behind him. It was bitterly cold up here beyond the plains, but it wasn't the cold that made him tremble.

The girl glanced up, began to say something. Then she stopped and the muscles of her face set. She asked: "What took you so long?"

"I rode up. Someone left a horse there for me—and my old saddle. I could have taken the train to Caldwell and come down by stage, and got here sooner. But I wanted to ride that horse."

He had stepped closer now, and only the desk separated them. "Did you send it?" he asked.

"No!" She shook her head.

"Do *you* know why they let me out?" he asked. "I had three more years coming to me even on good behavior. Six more all together. But they let me out and gave me a horse. Even my own saddle and gun. They gave me all my old clothes, too, and the cash that was in them when they took me. And nobody followed me. I expected they would."

"Maybe they knew where you were going."

"Yeah," Jeff said. He was beginning to see how he might have played right into their hands.

"They knew you'd come up here," she said. "They all knew I visited you when I was going to Sam Houston. And when I graduated they gave me this job up here, because this was where they caught you. Maybe you don't know about that school. They don't let just anybody go to it and I didn't have the qualifications. But they let me in because it's in Huntsville. They knew I'd call on you. They figured they might find out some of those things you were too pigheaded to tell them."

"Well, Kid," — Jeff grinned now —

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"they've got another think coming. And besides, I've reformed. I'm just going to take a little pasear around to see Smoky Hansen. I've got something to give him. Then I'm going to get me a job on a ranch somewhere and settle down."

The girl's blue eyes widened in sudden terror.

"Smoky wasn't the one who told on you. He wouldn't . . ."

"Hell," the cowboy said. "I know that. Smoky was my pal. And, yuh know, I had a lot of time down there at Huntsville to catch up on my thinking. I had a chance to see you grow up into a lady. And I put two and two together. Smoky's your old man. I wouldn't plug him."

She jumped to her feet. "He's not. Black Tom Burns is my uncle. But Smoky's not my father."

Jeff's smile took on warmth. "Your old man never could lie any easier than you do. Even if he was boss of the meanest outlaw bunch to ride these parts, he never was much of a hand as a real crook. He should of been a parson. I never could figger why he was on the owl-hoot."

"You were riding with him."

"Hell—I was just a kid. My pa got his in the back from a Yankee jayhawker after the war when I was only a tyke. The Comanches got Ma and killed her. I was full of hot blood and down on everybody."

"At Huntsville," she said, hardly whispering, "you still hated everyone."

"Something happened," he said. "After you went away." He could not answer that question that had come to her eyes. Telling her all this somehow embarrassed him. "It wasn't anything special. But after you got out of that teacher's school and came up here—well—I didn't answer your letters because I didn't know what to say. I never was a hand to write, anyhow. But I read them every night—every one of them."

The high points of her cheeks glowed.

"Then you're going to give up your share of that loot. You really mean that about getting a job on a ranch?"

"Sure," he said softly. "I've got other plans. I don't want that money. I spent five years in the jug because I stole it. But I still don't want it. That's what I'm seeing Smoky about."

Quickly, and with the grace of some wild animal, the girl came around the desk to stand before the ex-convict. The top of her golden head hardly reached his straight chin and when she turned up her lips to his for a kiss she had to stretch on tiptoe.

"I'm so glad, Jeff!" She stepped away from him. "You'll find Smoky up at Escondido—going under the name of Pete Higgins. Tell him you saw me—and hurry. Smoky'll be riding in a couple of days—and—and I want you back."

DESPITE the girl's advice, Jeff did not hurry. He was pretty sure now why he had been let out of jail. Greta knew about the loot. She probably knew also that the time to divide it was at hand. Somehow the law had gotten wind of this so they had freed him, given him a horse, and said goodbye. Undoubtedly they were watching the schoolhouse at Peaceful and knew that he had called there.

So he rode north across the Canadian, taking it easy until he came out of the strip of blackjack that followed the river. There he cut in a circle, came back to the ford and waited in a screen of high brush. As he had expected, the posse had shown the good sense to stay a few miles behind him because, after all, they were not as interested in catching him as finding out where he was going.

Now they were coming across the shallow river bed one at a time, strung out, led by Gray Hawk, a Cheyenne scout.

Jeff had to laugh. Deputy U. S. Marshal Bill Colt had slipped a long way since that bitter day over five years ago when he had first run in Jeff Haley. He had had all those years to think up this scheme of finding the loot, and now he had muffed it. And when the stocky lawman brought up the rear of the six-man cavalcade, Jeff's smile broadened. The marshal looked as if his plan had already come to a successful conclusion.

Jeff let them go by.

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When the sounds of their passing had dwindled, he jumped his horse out of the blackjack, across the path into the timber on the other side. Here he found an old cow trail that he took at a gallop through the woods, weaving around until the night was so black trailing would be hopeless. Then he cut for the open country again and headed straight across the prairie at a long lope.

When he came to a bunch of cattle he stampeded it over his backtrail, then turned at right angles for several miles until he could blur his tracks again with another bunch of beeves.

And so it was that by noon of the next day he had lost the posse. It would take many days for them to catch up.

He rode hard after that, crossed into New Mexico and the hilly country, and with the following dawn was turning his weary mount into the valley where old Smoky Hansen ran his little horse ranch.

The horse stopped, nervous. The acrid smell of woodsmoke and burned flesh stung him. Then, when he lifted the mount to a trot, buzzards wheeled away from the charred remains of a shack in the valley bottom. Jeff rode up, and as he looked down the buzzards' shadows passed back and forth over the bones that still remained in the center of the tiny building's earthen floor.

Jeff slipped from the saddle, biting his lips. He had gotten here too late. The fire and the buzzards had done a good job. Only the Mexican silver buckle and scorched silver-starred six-shooters told him whose body he had found. A broken rib-bone was the only proof that Smoky Hansen had been shot in the back before the cabin was fired.

Jeff looked around.

Down by the corral he found a shovel with which he dug a grave. Burying what little there was left of his old friend, he erected a cairn over the head of the mound. Jeff had never learned to pray, though the chaplain at Huntsville had pretended to teach him while fishing for the hiding place of the loot. So Jeff took off his hat, bowed his head, and said:

"Be seein' yuh, Smoky. Maybe I'll be visitin' with yuh pretty soon. So long."

He backed away from the grave, climbed into the saddle and rode around and around that burned shack in ever-widening circles until he was sure of his ground. Sign showed that Smoky's horses had been driven off to the south. It also told how two riders had abandoned that herd and headed north.

Jeff drew in his horse. He took the last bullet from his belt, pulled the lead with his teeth. Inside was a small bit of paper, a piece torn from a crude, hand-drawn map. In the corner, Jeff had noted:

40 days to Xmas.

He counted them off on his gloved fingers. He had gotten out of the pen on January 2nd—eight days—four days to Waco—fourteen days to Peaceful. Two more days. Twenty-eight all together. Plenty of time.

He turned north, settled into a steady trot.

The hombres who had murdered Smoky were not after his horses. They had been interested in his piece of the map. And Smoky had thought them friends or they never would have got behind him.

Jeff figured he knew where to find them —forty days after Christmas. . . .

II

THERE WERE others riding to that same rendezvous. One, tall, lean, sardonic, coming down from Montana—two riding up from New Mexico. And deep in the Dismal Range, Old Black Tom Burns waited for them.

One morning Tom took the last of forty beans from a jar. He studied it, shuddered, then tossed it into the stove. It popped softly and Black Tom poured himself a drink, something he had not done before sunset in many a year.

By noontime it was snowing, and darkness came early. Black Tom trimmed the wicks of his two lamps, lighted them, set one in the front window and the other on the short bar that stretched across the rear of his combination saloon, general store, and owlhoot hotel.

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Then he checked the three double-barreled shotguns that he kept handy under the bar. He loaded them with fresh shells, took another drink of homemade whiskey, and leaned against the bar with his elbows on the smooth pine.

His black-and-tan hound watched all this from his corner, rolling his eyes, but not lifting his square chin from his paws. When the movement stopped, the dog sighed morosely and blinked sadly at his boss.

"Jesse," Black Tom said, "I don't like this, and I never did like it."

Jesse James sniffed. He had had an extra big bone today, and more meat than usual. He was full and lazy.

"Yes sir, Jesse. That was sure one hell of a windy night. Five years ago exact. Cold as sin. And five gents all hatin' themselves in here. Ready to kill. I run them off one at a time with a shotgun."

He sipped his drink. The dog banged his tail against the floor. The wind whistled through the pines.

"And maybe I'll have to do it again," Black Tom said.

Five years ago, and in the back room was little Greta sick with the scarlet fever. The squaw who had been taking care of her had run away into the the blizzard leaving Black Tom to look after the thirteen-year-old girl. Then the five men had come in, squabbling over how they should divide the loot from the U. P. holdup. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in new bills and gold coin.

"Yore mammy," Black Tom said to Jesse James, "set at the foot of Greta's bunk and shacked off everybody who'd stick his head in the door."

Jesse James liked to hear Black Tom talk about his mother. He did not know what his boss meant, nor of whom he was talking, but he knew it was good and he wagged his tail to show his pleasure.

"She wouldn't let nobody in exceptin' the kid—nobody but Jeff. Queen Victoria took quite a fancy to Jeff. It was over Jeff they were fightin'. The Watson boys didn't want to give him any of the loot. But Smoky said Jeff should have even shares with the rest even if he did only hold the horses. And in the middle of the argument Greta started cryin'. That's when Jeff and Smoky snapped their guns on the Watson boys. So he held 'em here with a couple of shotguns while Smoky took the loot and buried it."

It was almost dawn when Smoky returned with a map torn into six pieces, one for each and the additional piece for Black Tom.

"In five years, Smoky told 'em," Black Tom said to Jesse, "they could all come back. The kid would be old enough to take his own side in an argument, he said, and Greta would be out of her sick-bed by then, and they could fight all they wanted." Black Tom shuddered. "So Smoky rode off—and half an hour later I chased the rest of 'em off, one at a time. But the next night two come back. They got into Greta's room and Queen Victoria nearly killed one of 'em. Emmett Watson. Yore mammy chawed up Emmett so bad he couldn't fork a hoss for six months. She was a right dawg."

The dog had heard all this before, but it was still his favorite story, especially the last part. Now that his boss was through, Jesse raised his head. A moment later he ambled over to the door, put his nose to the crack, then backed away and howled. Black Tom dropped one hand under the bar to grip the comforting butt of the nearest shotgun.

"Come in an' set!" he called.

A GUST of snow swirled with the opened door, blowing in a tall, lean man with a red mustache. He pushed the door to with his hip, glanced around. "Evenin' Tom," he said. "Looks like I'm the only one here."

"The rest'll come," Black Tom said. "Set down, Jesse. Have a drink, Spur."

"Don't mind if I do."

Black Tom poured a half tumbler of whisky. Spur took it down in a quick gulp, licked his lips. "Tom," he said, "I been tellin' folks all the way from Montana to Sonora about yore whiskey. Worst whiskey this side of the Missouri. But it gets there."

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"Have another," Black Tom suggested. "Ain't been havin' much business lately so this batch got good and aged. Three months old, anyway."

"Don't mind if I do," Spur said. "Thought there was somethin' different about it."

"Got yore piece of the map?" Black Tom asked guardedly.

"I got it," Spur said.

The conversation lapsed after that. Jesse James went back to his corner but could not seem to concentrate on the important function of sleeping. He got up again after a while to examine Spur with his nose, then went to the door and howled.

"Company!" Black Tom said. "Come in!"

The door swung open. Snow eddied. Two men stepped in, their spurs clanking, shedding ice. These men were of medium height, both blond, with eyes like faded blue glass. They nodded to Spur who did not bother to return their greeting.

"Evenin', Emmett," Black Tom said. "Evenin', Edwin. Have a snort?"

The two men bellied up to the bar with the hound trailing them, sniffling. Suddenly Emmett Watson swung around, lifting his foot, and the dog jumped back toward his corner.

"Just kick him once," Black Tom said coldly, "and I'll kill you, Emmett."

"You know I hate dogs. Why didn't you get that mutt out of here?"

"I know lots of things," Black Tom said. He lifted the bottle to pour a drink. His hand was steady. "I know if you hurt that dog I'll fill you so full of buckshot you'll look like an Injun with the small pox."

Spur laughed shortly. "Tom, that feller talks like Emmett Watson. I heard a story about him once. Seems a dog bit him. Took a hunk of his rump big enough for Sunday dinner. I heard she died of it. Poisoned."

The hound was sitting in the corner, his eyes on Emmett Watson, somber and calculating.

"Seems this dog's name was Queen Victoria," Spur said. "An ol' dog guardin' a sick kid this feller tried to kidnap."

"By God!" Emmett swore. "Nobody's goin' to talk about me . . ."

"Don't pay no attention to him, Emmett," Edwin said, taking his brother's arm. "Don't listen to him."

Emmett blinked. "Okay, Edwin," he said. "Okay. Just because I don't like dogs they make up stories like that about me."

"Yeah," Edwin said. "Have another drink, Emmett."

Emmett took another drink. Black Tom asked:

"You boys got yore pieces of that map?"

"We got 'em," Emmett said.

EXCEPT for the sigh of the wind there was silence again around the tiny cross-trail store, broken now and then by the clink of Emmett's glass against the pine bar and the rustle of liquor poured from the bottle. Then Jesse James howled again.

"Come in!" Black Tom said.

The lamps flickered, smoked in their chimneys, and the snow was a quick, powdered whirlpool until the door slammed shut. Jesse James barked, wagged his tail and Black Tom looked for the first time that evening as if he were glad to see his visitor. The newcomer's spurs sang a silver song, and he walked lightly over to the bar while the other three men tried unobtrusively to keep hands near gun-butts.

"If this is a trap . . ." Emmett Watson growled.

"Shut up!" Edwin said.

"It's only the Kid—Jeff," Black Tom said. "Have a snort. You look froze."

The tall, broad-shouldered cowboy shook snow from his sheepskin coat, slapped his Stetson against his leg to break the ice. He patted the square head of the hound who was rubbing against his knee.

"You'd think the dawg knew me, Tom," he grinned. "His mammy must of told him I'd be along someday. H'lo, boys. And thanks for the drink, Tom. I been dreamin' for five years of yore panther poison. Smoky never would let me touch it in the old days. But I stole some once."

"Them dreams must of been nightmares," Spur said.

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Emmett and Edwin Watson had been studying Jeff. Five years had done a lot to the Kid, turned from a beanpole into a powerful man. It had done other things to him, too, changed the wild light in his eyes to something cool and even.

"You look kinda pale," Edwin Watson said. "Ain't you feelin' good, Jeff? I never would of knowed you!"

"I feel fine," Jeff said.

"Been gettin' plenty of rest?" Emmett asked, his voice carrying an overtone of insinuation.

"Been gettin' lots of it," Jeff's expression made no change. "Been goin' to bed early and gettin' up early for nearly five years, Emmett. Damned if you boys don't still look just alike. Only it's no trouble tellin' you apart."

Spur laughed noisily. That was an old joke up the trail.

"Heard somethin' like that lately," Spur said, "about a couple of fellers known as the Watson twins. Gent tells me they look just like they was one feller with a looking glass. Only one smelled like skunk and the other like polecat."

Spur was the only one laughing, but he did not seem to mind. Emmett flushed darkly. Edwin's hand was on his brother's wrist.

Black Tom said: "I don't see why you boys can't spend a peaceable evenin' only once."

"We will some day," Spur said, "when we're lyin' in a row and that U. S. Marshal, Bill Colt, is chargin' two bits admission for folks to come and look at our corpses."

He laughed again.

Jeff said: "Seems just like the old days, don't it?" Jeff was talkative. As a kid nobody had let him say a word. "You were sayin' I look pale, Edwin. Well, I'll tell yuh about it. It's from washin' soot off my face. I been learnin' how to make wagon wheels. Beatin' out tires on an anvil. Look—" He held out his hands, palms up. They were strong, calloused. "When you spend five years in that shop you can twist a horseshoe like it was made of butter. Make it into a pretzel."

THERE was no doubt that he was looking at Edwin Watson's neck, rather than into his eyes. Edwin tried to grin. Now Emmett laughed. Jeff added:

"A feller learns all sorts of things up there in the Huntsville Pen."

Black Tom cut in hastily: "You got yore piece of that map?"

"I ate it," Jeff said, "when the law came after me. But I got an awful good memory."

This time he looked at Emmett Watson and Emmett gulped another drink.

"You got us wrong, Jeff. I had a friend down to Huntsville. He said you were going to kill me for sicking the law on you. But I never done it, Jeff. I was hidin' out in a cave, all chawed up. Honest to God. Edwin was nursing me."

"Couldn't of been bit by a dawg?"

"By God, Jeff, you're going to . . ."

His hand dropped to the gun that was slung in a holster on his thigh. But Jeff Haley only smiled.

"Go ahead and shoot," he said. "I'm kinda rusty with an iron so you oughta be able to get in your slug first. But a bullet will make me forget my piece of that map quicker than a bear'll spot a honey tree."

Edwin Watson was tugging his brother's arm. "You're just too ornery," he said. "He's been drinkin' too much, Jeff. Him and me knows yo're just joking."

"I'm glad somebody thinks it's funny," Jeff said. Turning to Black Tom, he added: "What're we waitin' for? We're all here."

"Smoky Hansen ain't here," Black Tom said. "We're waitin' for him."

"Smoky ain't coming," Jeff said. "Bushwhacked two weeks ago down to his horse-ranch at Escondido."

"You're lyin'," Spur said. "And I might as well tell you I don't like this. You got ten years, Jeff. How come you're here?"

Jeff's voice was cold. "If you think I'm lying, just ask Emmett. Maybe he knows how come I got out of jail early, too. Somebody tipped the law off to this meeting. Didn't tell 'em where it was, though. The law trailed me. But I got away from Bill Colt and they're still huntin' around the Panhandle."

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Emmett Watson growled. "I ain't seen Smoky's face since he left here five years ago. I don't know nothing about him—or about you."

Jeff held his tongue. Spur said:

"If the law's coming and Smoky's sure enough dead, we better get on with this divvy. Five pieces of that map is all we need."

"We need six pieces," Black Tom said quietly. "Smoky drew that map. He kinda figured one of the boys would try to bushwhack him. He fixed that map so it didn't mean a thing without all six pieces."

"Maybe Emmett knows where the other piece is?" Jeff suggested.

Emmett Watson roared. His gun was in his hand fast as a flash of lightning. Jeff was caught flat-footed—and five years working in the penitentiary's wagon shop had slowed him down . . .

III

BLACK TOM was glad he had shipped the girl, Greta, out of here five years ago and had never let her come back. She had grown up to be a lady in the Sam Houston Normal School at Huntsville, and was now a schoolmarm down at Peaceful near the Staked Plains. He was glad she was not here now and he wondered briefly if that, too, had been part of Smoky Hansen's scheme when he buried the loot and made that map.

Smokey had had a way of looking ahead.

Smoky knew the Kid would grow up in five years and be able to take his own part . . .

Emmett Watson had filed off part of the trigger guard for occasions just like this. Once he had gotten his finger snagged in the guard and would have been killed if his brother had not stepped in. But this time nothing like that was happening. Emmett's gun came up with practiced speed, his finger slipping through the opening, squeezing down on the trigger. Black Tom could not even reach his shotguns in time, nor could Jeff get away.

But over in his corner, Jesse James growled—only that warning, and no more.

Emmett's eyes shifted momentarily. The dog was coming for him, his big mouth wide, his strong teeth glistening. Emmett screamed, froze. He was like a crazy man in a fit, standing there, motionless, while Jesse James whirled through the air, while his powerful jaws clamped down over Emmett's wrist. Then the gun dropped and the hangout was a shambles.

Spur stood at his end of the bar, laughing. At the other end was Jeff, his gun now in his hand, a dazed look on his face. Black Tom was ordering the dog down and Edwin Watson was standing behind his brother kicking for Jesse's belly. Then the hound loosened his hold, scampered off to the corner, licking his chops, eyeing Emmett balefully, watching the blood drip from Emmett's hand.

"That dog," Black Tom said, "I trained him, Emmett. I told you not to try nothing. You better put up yore gun, too, Jeff, or he'll go after you in a second. He would of already only he ain't seen you yet."

Jeff holstered his Colt. He poured a drink, his hand steady again.

"Emmett," he said, "I got plenty of reason to believe you set the law on my tail—and plenty to think you bushwhacked Smoky for his piece of the map. But I guess you won't try shootin' me again."

Emmett said nothing, only turned his eyes on Jeff a moment, then on the hound, and there was no doubt at all that when this buried loot was dug up, Emmett Watson would go hunting for both of them. His brother said sharply:

"Snap out of it, Emmett. You better thank that dog. If you'd killed Jeff there'd be two parts of that map missing."

Cynically, Spur said: "You're not sticking to that story that you don't have Smoky's piece?"

"We never got it," Edwin said. "If you think we bushwhacked Smoky, okay. We can't prove we didn't. Not right now. But we don't have the piece of the map and we never did have it. Here, Emmett, I'll fix yore hand."

They gave Emmett a good stiff drink

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of whiskey, poured more on the jagged tear on his wrist, then bound it with the tail of a shirt. Emmett was sullen, mean. Edwin said:

"Just to show you we got nothin' to hide, I'll you how come Jeff got out of the jug. Me and Emmett talked it over. We figgered the map was no good to any of us unless we had all of it. Maybe you think we was going to bushwhack him and steal his piece of the map. Okay. It so happens we weren't. Anyway we tipped off Bill Colt that Jeff and a couple other guys knew where the loot was. Only it would take all three to find it. We knew Jeff was smart enough to get away from anybody trackin' him. And he was. Anyway, ain't he here, instead of in the jug?"

"I sure do appreciate that, Edwin," Jeff said.

Spur cut in with another laugh. "It was a mighty nice thing, Edwin. You know, I figger Smoky planned on us gettin' together here to shoot it out. Then he and Tom would split the loot. But it ain't too long to fool him. There's a quarter of a million buried near here, some place. Enough for all to go to the Argentine and try some honest ranching. I guess we can figger it out by what we got of the map. If it ain't on any of our pieces, we can dig up all the country left over.

"Yeah," Jeff said. "Got a piece of paper, Tom?"

Black Tom got out a piece of paper. "Boys," he said, "I figger it's a good idea to stack our hardware some place while we put this map together. It might give somebody ideas."

"We'll stack our guns down near that dog," Spur said. "I guess he's just about the only one here who don't want all of that quarter million."

THE guns were in a neat row by the nervous hound, and the map laid out on the bar top. Jeff had drawn the bit he claimed to remember from years ago and fitted it in with the rest. But Black Tom was right. No piece of the map was much good without the bit that Smoky had had.

"That's the big tree out by the brook," Black Tom said, pointing to a mark on the map, "the big beech. That's Bald Top Mountain, out behind. Draw a line between the two of them and what do you have?"

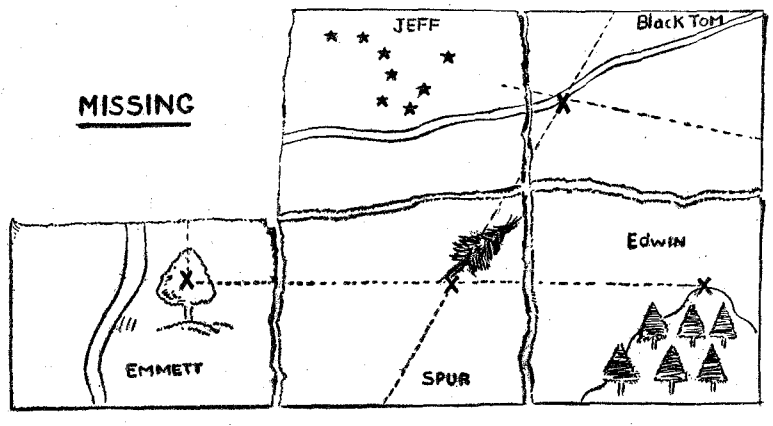
"Looks like a pine tree to me," Spur said. "I been studyin' this piece for years but the world's full of pine trees."

"It's a pine tree that's blowed down," Tom said, "right on the line between Bald Top and hat beech. Foller the trunk to my piece of the map where it goes across the trail south."

Emmett was not saying a word. His twin brother was taking care of the whole family for the time being. He looked at Jeff, his eyes slitted.

"You tryin' to tell me yore piece was just a lot of stars and a wiggly line?"

"That's just exactly what it was," Jeff said briefly. "Maybe I got that wiggly line



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in the wrong place. But the stars are right. It's the big dipper and the pole star. And you stick it right here, alongside Black Tom's piece, and above yores, Spur, and draw a line from Black Tom's 'X' through the pole star, and what do you have?"

"You have Smoky's piece of the map, which we ain't got."

"You got a lot of land to dig holes in," Edwin Watson said.

Maybe yore piece belongs over Emmett's piece," Black Tom said to Jeff. "We know where the rest of them go 'cause they fit together. But you had to draw yore piece. Maybe that wiggly line is the brook."

Jeff shook his head. "It was comin' on morning when Smoky drew this map. Morning, this time of the year, the dipper is sitting on its bottom, so that couldn't be the brook, because it's running the wrong way. It's the trail, I figger." Jeff moved over his bit of the map to show this. "It would have to have the brook to belong above Emmett's piece."

"Thing to do," Spur said, "is to sight a line from yore 'X', Tom, to Jeff's start and start diggin' a trench to hell and gone until we come across that dinero."

"Diggin' trenches," Edwin Watson said, "is nice clean fun with the ground frozen four feet down."

"Smoky done it," Spur said.

"Yeah," Jeff said. "Smoky done it."

"You got tools?" Edwin Watson asked Black Tom.

"I got plenty tools," Black Tom said, "includin' picks. Only I'm quittin' right now. I don't want none of that loot. You boys can have it all."

Emmett Watson spoke for the first time since the dog bit him.

"Yo're the first feller I ever knew who didn't want fifty thousand dollars. Maybe you got a lot more than that salted away, huh? Maybe you got two hundred and fifty salted away?"

"I was right here in this room when Smoky buried that dinero!" Black Tom said. "And I never seen him again."

"You were right in the room, all right!" The suspicion was coming back to Emmett. "And you've had five summers when the ground wasn't froze, to poke around. Includin' the first when the snow went and you could find fresh dirt easy."

Spur said very calmly: "I figger we'll all be a lot happier—an' make more out of this deal if we plug Emmett right now and toss him in the creek."

"I don't know but it might be a good idea," Emmett's brother said. "I'm gettin' kinda worn out pullin' him out of pickle tubs. And with that hand he can't do no diggin'."

The four men were all facing Emmett. Emmett's jaw clamped shut. His wounded hand dropped automatically toward his empty holster. He started backing away slowly as if the rest were converging on him, stark terror in his blue-glass eyes. And then, suddenly, Jesse James howled.

The door swung open before anyone could move closer to the guns, bringing with it an icy wind. Emmett Watson was forgotten for a moment as a very pleasant voice said:

"Evening, boys. Been expecting me?"

V

SPUR WAS the first one to speak. "Ma'am, we was just gettin' ready to murder Emmett Watson. Emmett, thank the lady for breakin' up our necktie party."

The girl closed the door behind her, stood with her back to it, smiling enigmatically.

"Why'd you come?" Black Tom asked, his voice cracking.

"Why'd the rest come?" Her dark blue eyes moved from one man to the other. She held Jeff for a moment, that odd little smile almost flickering out. "Why'd you come, Jeff? I thought you said you'd learned your lesson."

"I went to school long enough," Jeff avoided a direct answer. "But I haven't graduated yet. Anyway, it looks like I'd have to spend a few more years studying blacksmithing—because I'm taking you back to town and Bill Colt would call that kidnaping."

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He stepped toward her. The smile was back on her full lips again.

"No, you're not. I came for my father's share of that loot and I'm not going back without it. I would have been here hours ago, but the law got wind of the meeting and I had a hard time skipping past them. They were following you, Jeff. When you slipped them, they followed me."

Spur gasped suddenly: "You're not—Greta?"

"Grown into a big girl!" She made a short curtsy. "Pleased to meet you. You must be Spur. Haven't changed much. And you two," she added to the Watson boys, "just look a little meaner than you did. Or maybe my memory is slipping."

"You're not Smoky Hansen's daughter?" Edwin Watson said. "I thought you—"

She laughed merrily. "Nope—Tom's my uncle. Don't you think I favor him?"

Nobody offered to say that this lovely vision took after grizzled old Black Tom. But her eyes, her hair—she could have gotten them from big blond Smoky Hansen.

"Well, we're all here now," she said, "so let's get on with the good work. I notice you've put the map together. You must have found pop's piece."

"She said the law was on us," Emmett suddenly burst out. "We shouldn't of got them to let Jeff out. I told you that, Edwin. We better beat it and come back later."

The girl's voice was heavy with scorn. "There's only fifteen or twenty in the posse, Emmett. You wouldn't be afraid of only fifteen or twenty lawmen, would you?" Greta seemed to be the only one there who was at ease—as if this was all a bit of a lark for her. "What happened to your wrist, Emmett? You haven't been kidnaping little girls again, have you?"

Spur laughed. Black Tom was keeping very close to his shotguns. The Watson boys retreated into their scowls. Jeff had Greta by the arm now and was talking to her.

"You can't stay here," he insisted. "You can't be found with us."

"You didn't use to worry," she said brightly.

"We were only kids. It wasn't any of my business then. But—well—it is my business now."

"It might have been," she said sharply, "if you hadn't come tonight. But here you are. And now it's none of your business what I do." She turned away from him, smiled again in that curiously even manner as she saw the hound standing by her, wagging his tail, looking as happy as his sad face would allow. She leaned down, patted him on the head: "H'lo, Jesse James. How do you like my friends?"

Jesse James jumped up. She tugged his ears, laughing. Then Emmett said:

"Do you have your old man's piece of that map, Greta?"

"Shut up, Emmett," Edwin said. "You've near ruined this already."

"Sit down, Jesse!" the girl ordered. She turned on Emmett Watson. "Oh—are you still here? I thought the boys were going to hang you." Then she added: "By the way, boys—I forgot to tell you. Or maybe you know. Smoky won't be coming tonight." She looked straight at Emmett. "He was bushwhacked a couple of weeks ago. You'll have to ask his killer for the map."

Emmett scowled. "Jeff told us. Jeff seems to know a lot about it."

The girl's eyes flashed to Jeff for a moment. He could not read what he saw there. He could not tell if she was accusing him. This cold, expressionless girl was new to him.

"He was killed the day before I got there," Jeff said, "while that posse was trying to trail me."

Greta started to speak. Spur cut in:

"If we're ever going to dig up that loot, we better get going. It's getting on to dawn . . ."

THE night had cleared, cold and sharp as a block of new ice. Black Tom stayed behind, sitting over the men's guns, guarding them with his own three sawed-offs. Spur led the way down to the old beach tree by the brook and sighted to the peak of Bald Knob shining in the starlight. They stretched out in a straight line until

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they came to a fallen pine tree that pointed in the direction indicated by Spur's bit of map. The tree was nearly rotted away, the trunk only a hump in the snow. But they drew another bead, moving in relays to keep it straight until they came to the trail leading south.

Here they stopped, gathered in a little group, the Watson boys off by themselves, Spur, Jeff, Greta and Jesse James, a bit ahead of the twins. And through the trees they could see the Great Dipper and the Northern Star sitting right over a quarter of a million dollars.

They went due north, always toward the North Star, straight through the dense growth of pine.

When they lost it, they would back up, start over again. And so they made their way, slowly over this final stretch, keeping a keen outlook for some sign, some cave or windfall, anything that might have offered itself years ago to Smoky Hansen as a possible hiding place of their train loot.

But one foot of their path was no different from the rest—all the same mean, rocky earth, the same trees everywhere, until Jesse James broke from them, running straight ahead, yelping. They hesitated only a second, then followed in a mad rush, stumbling through the undergrowth. Emmett was ahead — and his cursing came back to them.

They emerged from the clearing behind Black Tom's cabin, the snow faintly lighted by the lamp in the window on the creek side, the hound wagging his tail, watching them, looking pleased as if Smoky Hansen had played a big joke on all of them. And Emmett was swearing steadily:

"That dog—there's devil in that dog. He brought us back here. He knows where that dinero is."

"He don't know nothing," Spur said flatly. "And Smoky Hansen wouldn't of pulled a trick like that. The gold's hid here somewhere. All we got to do it start right at the edge of the shack and work back. Emmett . . ."

"I can't dig," Emmett cut in. "How in hell can I dig with this hand like it is?"

"You don't need to dig," Spur said. "Just run around front and tell Tom we found where that map ends. Tell him to put on some coffee. And bring back a bottle."

Jeff could not figure this. He had been convinced that the murderer of Smoky had the rest of the map. But Emmett was not putting on an act. He did not have the piece that had belonged to Smoky, and Spur was not a bushwhacker.

Emmett went off looking relieved. The girl stood there in her furs, smiling faintly. Jeff and Edwin went to work with their picks along a path Spur shoveled in the snow. But the ground was frozen hard as flint.

"We'll never get it up tonight," Jeff said.

"We *gotta!*" Spur whispered to him. "You see the look in Emmett's eyes. We gotta get that dinero and beat it or those Watson boys will have us all tacked to the fence. They know as much as we do about the loot. They don't need us no longer."

Jeff smashed down with his pick. Spur shoveled the packed snow.

"Can you trust the girl?"

"Sure," Jeff said.

"Tell her to keep a gun handy—and to watch our backs."

"What are you talkin' about?" Edwin cut in.

"About our spread in the Argentine," Spur said. "Me and Jeff are going pardners."

Emmett had come back with the whiskey. He offered it to the girl first, leering. She took it and handed it to Jeff. Jeff swallowed a good stiff two fingers. It made him a little light-headed. He was not used to drinking. He passed it on to Spur, stepped away from the beginning of the trench, closer to Greta.

"Listen. Get a gun. Then ride. The Watson boys are spoiling for hell."

She nodded. Jeff noticed for the first time that she was fighting to keep up that nonchalant smile. Her eyes glistened in the starlight.

"Jeff—" she whispered—"the law *is* coming. I tipped them off. When they lost

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your trail and you didn't come back, I rode up to Smoky's. That marshal and his Indian followed me. I loved my old man and I hated those others for killing him. I know they did it, the Watson boys, for his piece of the map. But they didn't get it!" Her voice choked, then came clear again. "You better get out, Jeff. The posse should be hear by dawn. I promised to stall until then."

Jeff asked: "You told them we were here?"

"I didn't know you'd be with them, Jeff! I didn't know where you'd gone. For all I knew you might have been buried with Smoky down at Escondido."

"Ah . . ." Jeff said. "Ah . . ."

V

BLACK TOM was staying in the shack watching the guns. He felt safer in here with those weapons under his eyes—but even having the six-shooters laid out there in the corner of the room where no one could get them without passing the muzzle of his shotgun, did not make Black Tom feel completely at ease.

He was worried about the girl—about Jeff. He knew that there would be a fight before daylight, if not with guns, then with picks and shovels, and he wanted to get Greta out of the way before it broke.

When Emmett came back, asking for coffee for the boys, Black Tom did not like the look on his face. Emmett looked too much like a cat that smelled a mouse.

"Tell 'em I'll cook some coffee," Black Tom said. "The pot's empty. Maybe you better tell that girl to come in here and rastle up some breakfast. Tell her I said so."

Emmett nodded, left saying: "Okay, Tom, Okay."

To get back to the diggers, Emmett had to pass the lean-to where the horses were stabled. Each time by, he had stopped off for a moment, not long enough to arouse suspicion, but giving him plenty of time to complete a few chores. The first trip, he took a spare Colt from his saddlebag. On succeeding trips, he saddled his horse, then his brother's, then Greta's. He did not want to lose any time when that loot was found.

He was ready when Black Tom sent him for the girl.

Walking down the path he felt as if someone was following him. But back of the house, everyone was there. Edwin and Spur were digging, Jeff was standing by the shallow trench holding Greta's arm. And the dog, who had been watching the procedure with much interest, had started sniffing the cold night wind. As Emmett stepped up, the dog howled. Emmett shied away like a frightened steer. His teeth clicked as he gave Greta her message.

"Tom wants you. Says to cook up some breakfast. He's makin' coffee now."

"Tell him I'll come," she said tensely.

Jeff's grip tightened on her arm. "It ought to be daylight pretty soon."

"Be seeing you, Jeff!" she tried to smile, turned away and went back toward the cabin. Jeff waited a moment until Emmett and the girl had vanished around the corner of the shack. Then he dropped his pick and said:

"I'm goin' to warm up. Want to join me, Spur?"

"Yeah," Spur said. "Good idea."

Jeff started off, walking too fast. The hound had begun to run around in circles, sniffing. Edwin Watson, still holding his shovel, followed them toward the cabin. But they had not yet reached it when things broke. Jesse James had stirred up something in the brush.

Jeff knew what it was. He ran for the lean-to, the others close on his heels. There was cursing from the brush where Jesse James had poked his nose. From the lean-to came a sudden sharp cry, the pounding of hoofs on the frozen earth. A horse tore out of the shelter, bearing two riders, trailing a second mount. A rifle barked from the brook, behind a tree. The man in the saddle shot quickly for the rifle flash—the flame of his gun lighting his face for a moment.

It was Emmett Watson.

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"I got the girl on my knee!" he howled. "You shoot me and you'll hit her."

JEFF made a flying tackle for the second horse, slipped and went slithering through the snow on his stomach. Now Spur was running for the lean-to, yelling:

"It's a trap!"

Edwin skidded around the corner, heaved his shovel with all his strength, clipping Spur in the spine and sending the oldster whirling. He kept on coming, cut into the lean-to and was out again on another horse before Jeff could get up. Jeff felt a bullet smack into the ice beside his face as Edwin pounded by. And now, down the creek, in the brush beside the clearing, everywhere it seemed, were men running, shouting, shooting.

Edwin Watson taking the road south, was driving them off, keeping the trail clear. Then, for a moment, there was silence, and through it came Emmett's half-mad voice:

"If anybody follers—I'll plug her, sure as Fate."

Jeff got to his knees. Now the posse was running in from the outskirts. They were not shooting. They had all had a good chance to see Greta on Emmett's knees, in the light of the powder flame. They all knew that Emmett would do exactly what he said.

Jeff could not stay there. He crawled over to the dark blot of snow that he knew was Spur. Spur was breathing hoarsely.

"Jeff—Jeff," Spur gasped. "You gotta bring her back. You gotta, Jeff."

"I'll bring her back," Jeff said.

The posse was running toward the shack. It was still too dark to recognize anyone, but the sky was graying, sharpening the soft shadows, cutting the pines like jagged black paper against the pale background of the winter dawn.

Jeff was surrounded. Another moment and he would be seen. He came to his feet, turned loose the three horses in the lean-to, slapped them into the open. It drew the fire and attention of the posse while Jeff ran, bent double, along the edge of the clearing.

At the southern boundary, he stopped, hunkered down. All through the woods he could hear the crackle of brush, the squeak of snow as men walked toward the cabin. He could not get away now. He could not possibly escape. There was only one chance. He dove under a spruce, huddled there beneath the low branches that were laden with snow, hiding out like a grouse.

The posse kept coming in. Jeff was unarmed, unhorsed—he had left a trail that a cow could follow.

Jesse James ran yelping by. A moment later two posse-men passed.

"We shouldn'ta left our hosses down the gorge," one of them said.

The other was Deputy Marshal Bill Colt. "Nope, we should of sneaked right up here, big as life, mounted."

"Maybe we couldn'ta surrounded them horseback," the first one countered, "but we could of chased them."

Bill Colt said: "Which is what worries me. We gotta trail them, Joe. But I hate to think of what they'll do to the girl . . ."

They moved on, out of earshot. A moment later an uproar arose near the lean-to. They had found Spur.

"It's Spur. Kicked by a hoss—or something."

From his hiding place, Jeff could see the men gathering there, hardly more than shadows. He debated whether to make a break for it.

"Hey, you fools," someone called from the woods behind him, "the rest will get away."

The group by the lean-to held a conference. Black Tom had come from the cabin and was talking to one of them. Someone called back:

"There ain't any more!"

"There's Jeff—the Kid."

"He wasn't here. Tom says so. So does Spur. They say he never did have a share of that loot coming to him and never did know where it was hidden."

Jeff blessed those two.

The posse was passing the bottle. The rest of them were moving in from the woods. A couple headed down the stream

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for the horses. More of them went into the shack.

Jeff burrowed deeper into the powdered snow. He could get away now. He could get out onto the trail. But there would be no way of hiding his tracks. They'd catch up with him and bring him back—and he would be no use to Greta . . .

THE SUN came up in a gray haze. There must have been fifteen or twenty men in that posse. One group built a big fire in the shallow trench that the outlaws had dug, to thaw the ground and make digging more possible. Another group, half a dozen in all, led by Big Bill Colt, mounted their horses when the animals were brought up, and struck out along the trail the Watson boys had taken. Still a third group relieved those by the fire now and then, and by noontime were picking at the steaming earth in search of treasure.

Through all this, Jeff held to his hideout, waiting for night. In the meantime, Black Tom had been busy. He broached a keg of his homemade whiskey, let it flow free until half the posse could hardly stand up. It was torturing to Jeff, watching those men by the fire and seeing Black Tom pass the noggin. But he knew that his friend was working for him; and this helped him stand the bitter cold that was intensified by his inaction.

By afternoon his feet were cakes of ice in his boots, his back cramped as if tortured on a rack. He tried to rub some life back into his toes, kneading the soft leather boots with gloved hands. It warmed his fingers, but there was no sensation left in his feet.

It was while he was doing this that a change fell over the posse. One of the men came from the house, carrying a jug of whiskey. He shook his head, handed the jug to the leader of the digging squad. They talked quietly for a moment; then everyone took off his hat, and the jug went around the silent circle.

It was an odd little ceremony. The hound, who had been confined to the house, began to howl. Jeff shuddered. Spur—old Spur had died—as square a man as ever had followed the owlhoot trails. And even the posse took off their hats to this hombre who had been cut down by a member of his own bunch.

Then Jeff abruptly made up his mind. If he stayed here he would freeze to death. If he tried escape, he might be caught—but even that would be better—and if these men could drink to a dead outlaw, they might even be persuaded to let him follow the trail of the Watson boys.

It was a forlorn hope. But the whiskey was doing its work on the posse and that added the incentive that Jeff needed to try an escape. He turned his back on the shack, dug under the drift, beneath the snow-laden boughs of the spruce, to come out on the other side. Slowly he worked his way along to the trail that the Watsons and the posse had taken, like an Indian, creeping from one tree trunk to the next. But, once he hit the trail, he ran hard.

No gun. No. food. His stomach tied in a knot from hunger, his feet beginning to sting as if his shoes were full of tarantulas. Cowboy boots never meant for walking, never intended as protection against the cold. Then the sharp, bitter pains shot through his arches. But there was nothing else to do. He had to keep going—and when he could no longer run he walked.

Even when the shadows became long and flat, it was easy to follow the spoor of the Watsons with the tracks of the six posse-horses on their tail. They kept to the regular trail for several miles, then cut off up the ice of Roaring River. Here, Jeff took to the brush again, for the ice carried the dull tattoo of walking horses..

The sun was setting, the snow crystaline blood, when four horsemen slowly passed. They were leading another horse across which two bodies were slung, and Bill Colt no longer looked cocky. They went right by Jeff, too pre-occupied to notice that a man had walked along the trail to this point. It was not necessary for the posse to shout into Jeff's ear that they had met the Watson twins and that neither of the bodies was Emmett or Edwin.

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Jeff let them vanish into the woods, then turned back to the ice. Upstream he came to the place where they had been ambushed. Blood on the snow. A dead horse. Marks of men where they had lain down. Cartridge cases by the dozen. He stumbled on. Here, behind rocks, was where the Watsons had forted up. More empty shells, but not so many as the posse had left behind. There were no two people in the world who could shoot like Emmett and Edwin Watson. They would make their lead count.

There was blood here, too, and the rocks were covered with glistening, spattered lead from the posse's guns—and a few feet before the rocks, in direct line with the posse, were the marks of two small feet, as if Greta had stood there during most of the fight.

Jeff wondered why she had not tried to run for it. Maybe this explained it, this curving line on the snow—it could have been made by a rope lashed to her wrists and held by the Watson boys to prevent her from escaping.

Jeff cursed bitterly. He began running and did not realize it until he fell in the snow. After a while he sat up, talking to himself:

"Don't be a damn fool—Get up and walk—walk!"

HE HAD to fight himself to keep down the pace. The night was cold again and up here in the high country were many stretches where the wind had blown the bare rock clear of snow and ice. Here he could follow the trail only by the tiny lights thrown out by the stars reflecting minute scratches turned up by the horses' hoofs. Here, at times, only intuition led him, and only that frozen icy hatred of Emmett Watson kept him going.

They had killed Spur with a shovel. They had murdered old Smoky. They had doublecrossed him into five years in jail. They had shot down two of that posse, hiding behind rocks, forted up mostly behind the body of a girl whom they had forced to stand between them and the posse's guns. Nothing could keep Jeff from going on until he caught up with them—armed or not, he would get them . . .

And then he suddenly found himself running again in panic—

Or lying face down in the snow.

It seemed as if he never got ahead, as if he spent all the time on the trail just talking to himself, trying to argue some sense into his head. And then, suddenly, he realized that he was back in the valley again. The Watsons had gone clear around the mountain.

Up there on a high slope the night was cut by a gleaming window. An old hermit trapper lived there where he could look on a clear day all the way down to the juncture of the Roaring and Red Rivers. It gave him a feel of being in the world, yet out of it. And here, a couple of outlaws could fort up and chase off almost any kind of posse in this weather.

Jeff left the trail, cut off along the edge of the natural upland meadow. He stumbled on, higher and higher.

He was yet a hundred yards from the shanty when his dull senses wakened to a movement behind him. He whirled around, reaching for the gun that was not there . . .

Something brown and white and black whirled out of the snow. Something soft and furry struck him, knocking him down onto his back. Something, hot and steaming, wiped across his face. It was Jesse James. Jesse glad to see his pal again; trying to lick him. It was Jesse yelping happily.

And then Jesse stood over him and bayed at the sky the way any good coon dog would do . . .

VI

ON HIS back, Jeff whispered hoarsely: "For God's sake, Jesse, shut up. She's in there! They . . ."

Jesse looked down puzzled, licked Jeff's face again. He shut up but the cabin door banged open and a man swore bitterly and lengthily.

"That hound—that damned hound . . ."

A gun barked—a bullet slicked into the

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snow. Jesse growled in his throat, jumped forward. The gun spoke again. The hound yelped shrilly and Edwin Watson's voice came hard across the meadow.

"Emmett—quit that. You trying to tell everybody where we are?"

Emmett was crazy.

"That dog . . . "

His brother yanked him inside, shut the door. Jeff rolled over onto his stomach. He could see Edwin's head in the window scanning the slope, and the dog ranging up nearer to the shack. He lay still until Edwin's head vanished, then crawled in closer, trying to reach Jesse.

The dog was wild, too, now, running up and down before the house, yelping. He had gotten the scent of someone he hated. But Jeff had to stop him. He had to get his hands on that hound—for in the brief second while Jesse stood over him baying, he had seen his own six-shooter dangling by the trigger guard from Jesse's collar.

It had been there—it was no dream—and he had to have that gun Black Tom had chosen to send him in such a peculiar manner. Yet he did not dare call for they had not yet discovered his presence—and the hound would not stop trying to tree the house.

As Jeff crawled up-slope the door opened again and the cowboy flattened in the drifts. Greta was there, her furs gone, standing in a red dress that was almost black against the yellow lamplight. There was a rope around one bare ankle, another line around her wrist, and she held out a plate to the hound.

"Jesse! Supper—Jesse!"

The dog stopped running. He looked at her curiously. She still held the plate.

"You skunks," she said bitterly, softly.

"Call him!"

Jeff came to his knees. That gun—he had to have it. He could not let that gun get away from him even if the Watsons did discover his presence. He licked his chapped lips, whistled shrilly.

The girl dropped the plate. Jesse turned his head. Jeff whistled again. Emmett jumped to the doorway, took a snap-shot at the dog, shooting with his left hand. The dog went after him. Emmett jumped back, knocking over the girl, and Edwin shoved the door closed. Jesse tried to turn in mid-air, smashed against the door.

Jeff was up, running hard. He made a leap for the dog. The two of them rolled over and over but Jeff got his hands on the collar and yanked the gun free. He backed up then against the house where those who were inside could not see him and for a moment the tears stung his eyes as he clung to that six-shooter as if it were the most treasured thing in the world.

And right then it was.

Now he was set to finish this battle. He tried to cock the weapon. The hammer was frozen down. Ice was in the barrel.

HE SLIPPED it inside his shirt, against the skin of his chest. The cold metal burned like a brand. He moved it over under his armpit where it would thaw out more rapidly. Now it burned no longer, but was only wet and bitter. He tried the hammer again and it still was stuck.

"Come out of there!" Edwin Watson called.

The dog glanced away from Jeff, growling at the door.

"Come out into the open with your hands up," Emmett added his piece. "Or we'll do something to the lady that'll bring you running."

"Just what?" Greta cut in sharply.

Emmett's voice went down into a snarl. But Jeff was so close to the wall he heard every word of it.

"We'll toss you out into the snow. And how would the Kid like that?"

"You wouldn't dare," she said.

"Wouldn't I?"

"Go ahead, Emmett," Edwin said.

"Open the door, Edwin, just a little bit," Emmett suggested. "Maybe he'd like to see what's going on."

The door swung back a crack. Jesse James poked his nose forward but did not leave his place. He whimpered. There, very close to the door, tied to a chair, was Greta. Her firm little jaw was set, and it

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was plain that she could not be downed by them.

Water, from the melting ice on the gun, was running in a shivery trickle down Jeff's side. He tried the hammer again, desperate. But the ice had not loosened.

"You come in that door with your hands up," Emmett called, "or we'll throw her out into the snow."

Suddenly the girl cried: "Don't do it, Jeff!"

Jeff knew the Watson boys well enough so that he would not bet an empty shell on any of their promises. They had tried to kidnap Greta once before to use her in forcing Smoky Hansen to give up the loot to them. They had taken her this time because she was their ace in the hole and, as they had demonstrated on the river bank, her slender body was better protection than a gatling gun.

Now Emmett's hand came from behind the door to appear over Greta's breast. It was his left hand, Jeff saw, that gripped the red dress at the opening of the throat. They had placed her very well. To reach Emmett with a bullet, even if only to hit his hand, would endanger the girl, probably kill her.

"What are you waiting for, Emmett?" Edwin snapped from somewhere out of sight. "That posse'll be back. Bill Colt ain't one to give up. He'll bring more men and ammunition."

"Yeah," Emmett said, "and he'll need 'em."

Of course, Jeff realized, Bill Colt would come back. But that did not make him feel any better. The marshal always bulled straight into a job. Even if he returned before the Watsons carried out their threat on the girl, it would not help her situation a bit. She would be their fort, their protection, as she now served to make him give in.

Emmett said: "You coming in, hombre?" He pulled at the girl's dress. Then he yanked suddenly and the cloth ripped. The girl gasped and Emmett laughed. Emmett enjoyed this. He yanked again, pulling the dress completely off her shoulders. Then Emmett suddenly swore. A bit of paper had fallen to her lap. Jeff saw Emmett's hand come into sight again and pick it up.

"Look! She had it all the time!"

"Smoky's piece!"

"Yeah," Emmett said. "And the loot wasn't there at all."

Edwin was nervous. "Finish your job, Emmett," he said. "Does that map tell where the dinero is?"

"It sure does," Emmett said. "That posse'll never find it. It's going to be all ours."

"It ain't," Edwin said, "unless we get that hombre outside."

And Jeff thought how ironical all this was. He'd come to the rendezvous, not for the loot, but for the person who had that bit of the map. He had come to kill that person, convinced it would be the one who had bushwhacked Smoky . . .

THEY had told Jeff to come in with his hands up, but had so placed the girl that her knees blocked the door. To get by her, Jeff would either have to do as they said, or to make a rush of it, knocking over Greta on the way. If he did that, the chances were that she would hit her head against the stove. The Watson boys were very thorough.

So there was nothing left for him to do but to give in. Maybe another opportunity would present itself. Maybe Bill Colt, the marshal, would show some brains when he returned and not simply storm the place. It would mean jail again for Jeff, if he lived to get there.

Jeff drew his gun, gave the hammer one last, forlorn yank with his thumb as he stepped toward the door. The ice broke so suddenly that the hammer snapped back, his thumb slipped off the knurls, and the firing pin cut down on a shell. The bullet went right through the middle of the door.

Emmett howled, jumped back, letting go of the girl, and she deliberately kicked herself away from the door. The dog yelped suddenly, plunged past Jeff like a runaway, and it came to Jeff in a flash that he had to get in there right away or not at all.

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The dog had bitten Emmett's right hand so badly last night he had to hold the gun in his left. But Emmett's left had been busy with the girl.

Jeff plunged through the door, smacking it back hard, and got there just as Emmett was reaching for his iron.

He did not expect to get them both, nor to even get out of here alive—but Emmett was the one he wanted, and Jesse James was going after Edwin. With Emmett dead and Edwin possibly hurt, the girl might have a fighting chance.

That's where Jeff made his mistake. The hound hated Emmett. When he bounded through the door, he stopped for a moment, growled low at Edwin, caught the scent of Emmett and whirled around. When Emmett reached for his gun, the dog sprang for him, running between Jeff's legs, upsetting him. Behind, a pistol spoke hallowly, the heavy slug clipping Jeff in the thigh as he stumbled, throwing him around and onto the floor. Here he found that Greta was between him and Edwin and that the Watson boy was angling around for another shot. The slug in his thigh had stunned him—his pistol was a weight too heavy to lift.

Emmett screamed. Jeff rolled over as a bullet bit the floor where his face had been. He was in the open now and Edwin was firing at him with two guns. Edwin's face was mottled with fear and a low growl sounded between Emmett's screams. Jeff concentrated on his job. As his gun bucked there was a flash of fur beside him. The bullet knocked Edwin down. The dog's leap carried him right over the dying gunman.

"No! Jesse! No!" the girl cried.

Jesse had been well trained. He had been taught to go after any man with a gun in his hand, and he was growling, his tail stiff behind him, as he stalked Jeff on the floor, the only one left in that room with a gun.

Jesse's eyes rolled.

"Drop it, Jeff!"

The cowboy's gun clattered on the floor. Jesse bayed and Jeff felt sick. What would have happened if the dog had been watching him, outside there, instead of keeping his eyes on the girl?

He shook himself and sat up. Emmett Watson, the meanest man from Canada to Chihuahua, was sobbing like a baby. He would never again be able to trigger a gun with either hand. But, unlike his brother, he would live to climb the gallows . . . .

Jeff crawled over toward the girl. His thigh burned where Edwin's bullet had struck him and the rest of his body was as heavy and lifeless as a wagonload of oats. Jesse James sniffed at him, then howled out the door.

"Posse's coming," Jeff said. "When they get here, tell them where that dinero is. Tell them I don't want it—and tell them to keep their guns in their pants. Jesse's spoilin' for some more fun."

He wished he could be here to see the expression on Bill Colt's face when he found the two Watson boys shot up and the girl tied to a chair. But he had had enough of Huntsville, and he was determined not to go back. He started crawling toward the door. Near the threshold he stopped over a bit of paper that Emmett had dropped. It was the other bit of the map, and it showed very plainly where the loot had been buried. Smoky, too, had found the earth too hard for digging, so he had planted the money under the sick girl's cot in Black Tom's back room.

He was getting dizzy. . . .

No frozen dirt there. Easy digging. And Smoky had been afraid of bushwhack so he had given the map to his daughter.

Well, he had to get going.

He moved forward another foot and collapsed. But the girl smiled softly. She would have a convincing story to tell Bill Colt whom she could see riding cautiously up the hill with all his posse behind him. She would tell him how Jeff had come back to find the money so he could return it—and had found the boys there. It was a thin story, but she could put it over. They would not take her Jeff away again.

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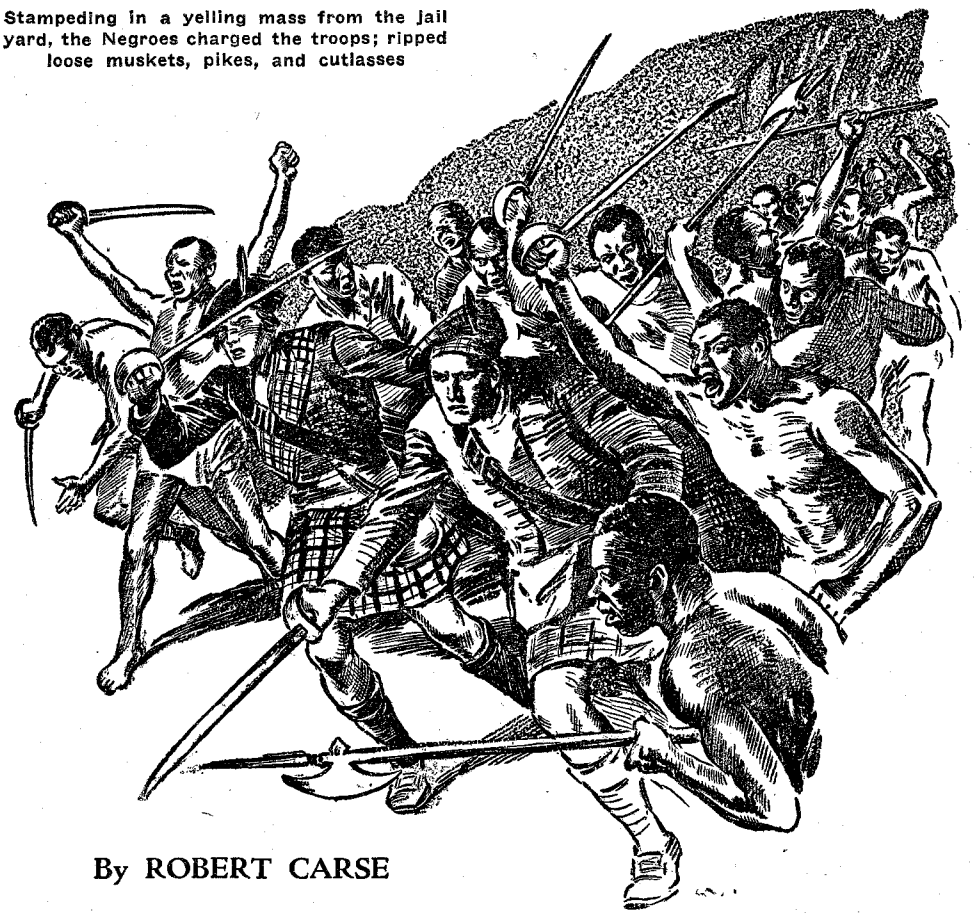
Stampeding in a yelling mass from the jail yard, the Negroes charged the troops; ripped loose muskets, pikes, and cutlasses



By ROBERT CARSE

Rebel Take Arms

REFUSING ever to submit to the hated English, DONALL KENZIE has left his native Scotland and gone forth to make a new world of his own. Behind him is the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie on Culloden Field, and the ruin of the Glen where the Clan Kenzie had foregathered.

Bitter memories go with him—of his brother, MARTIN, who surrendered to the English rather than fight until his last man was killed. For this Donall called him traitor and wounded him in a sword battle before leaving Scotland.

His one understanding friend is GEORGES RENEC, who was by his side in the fight for liberty at Culloden. With his clan piper, KIP, Donall accompanies the Frenchman to his home in Bezaude; meets Georges' beautiful sister, STEPHANIE, who tells him that his rebelliousness is foolhardy and useless.

BUT Donall is convinced of only one thing: the primary importance of making money so that he may have access to power. And when Renec's father proposes that the two young men take a cargo of slaves from Africa to Martinique, Donall persuades Georges to accept the venture.

After taking on a cargo of slaves, however, Donall realizes that these blacks are proud and liberty-loving people like himself. Too late he begins to understand Georges'

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inherent reluctance to engage in this sort of trade.

For they fail in an attempt to get the native slave dealer to take back those Negroes who have become ill; and Georges is mortally wounded in the ensuing fight.

NOW Donall, scarcely recovered from the fever that has gripped him for days, is left on Renec's ship. The *Aventurier,* with no one at his side but the piper, Kip. SIGAIX, the sailing master, has been left behind on the slave coast; and HOUDET, the mate, is surly and unsympathetic.

With the crew partly sick of fever, partly drunk, Donall releases the blacks from their chains and persuades their leader, BAKATAR, to cooperate with him in sailing the ship. He tells Bakatar something of his own struggles, and promises to give all these people their freedom when they reach Martinique.

But they are running out of supplies; and when they hail an English ship to try to buy more, the master reviles them as slavers, refuses to stop. Forced to a decision by life-and-death necessity, Donall determines to become a pirate for the nonce.

WHEN the wind dies, Bakatar has his people get into small boats and row, towing the *Aventurier* to the place where the English vessel lies becalmed. A terrific fight ensues, in which most of the English crew are killed, the rest surrender.

But Donall goes aft, for he has seen the English captain in the light of the side-lanterns on the poop. "'Tis the captain I want," he tells Kip; "for if I'm to be a pirate, I'll be a good one. . . ."

CHAPTER XI

FREEDOM—BEHIND BARS

THE English captain fought very well, defended himself at the head of the poop ladder, a pistol in each hand. He pistoled Houdet before Donall Kenzie reached him, put a ball through Houdet's throat.

Then the long Claymore blade whirred. The captain had no time to duck, and slid sidewise bumping down the ladder.

Donall Kenzie stood over him as he died. The captain looked up in a wide-eyed stare. "You're no Middle Passage scum," he said. "You talk and dress like a Scottish gentleman. But they'll hang you for this, hang you sure."

"Be still," Donall said. "'Tis your kind that makes honest lads turn pirate."

But the captain was dead, his bloody head dropped back against Houdet's knees.

A sick sensation came to Donall as the battle wildness ebbed in him. What would Stephanie think, he wondered, if she had had seen this. This had been no fight for the causes of kings and countries. It had been brutal and terrible, and the people who had really won it were the savage black folk.

Yet out of it for them would come freedom. He had forgotten that, must remember it.

When he met Stephanie again, he would tell her that freedom was worth such a price. It would be his answer, his explanation to her, and one in which he need take no shame. He had fought to make men free . . . .

Then, as he cleaned the Claymore blade and restored it to the scabbard, he thought of Martin. The difference between him and Martin was greater than ever now, he realized.

Martin served the English King, and he, Donall, had soundly whipped the English here. Martin would call him a pirate, tell him that all his predictions had come true. Martin's term for him would be a cheap murderer.

But a pox upon what Martin thought. That no longer counted, and here there was work to do.

He went forward through the ship stopping those who still fought. He found Kip by the crashed mainmast, and Bakatar erect in the centre of a group of dead.

"No more, chief," he told Bakatar. "We'll need what's left of them to help us get the ships to Martinique."

"My people have fought hard," Bakatar said. "They must have their freedom."

"They will," Donall said. "You've earned the price. This ship is worth a lot more than what your people bring as slaves. But we'll have to clear both ships and rig them so they'll sail. Find me men who can work. Then in a week

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we'll be in Martinique, and you'll be free."

Bakatar gave him a searching glance. "Why go to Martinique," he said, "if you seek power of your own? The French are afraid of power in other men. Their whole way of life out there is built on slavery. We should go to another island, one that is far from the French."

"No," Donall said. "If we don't go to Martinique, the French and the English both will have reason to call us pirates. The *Aventurier* doesn't belong to me; it must be returned to a man named Renec. It's he who paid for the trade goods that bought you as slaves. He can have the price of this English ship to repay him, and then we'll go and find a place for ourselves."

"It will be as simple as that?" Bakatar said.

"We'll make it so," Donall said, his jaw lines sharp. "But now get your men to work. Let us move these ships west!"

HE HAD imagined it many times, this beauty that was Martinique. But the sight of the island rising in the dawn radiance surpassed any of his dreams. He left the wheel to Kip; went to stand at the rail and watch each headland, each mountain slope and crest take the sun.

His own Glen Cluagh lacked the color, the sheer magnificence of Martinique, he recognized with a kind of grudging jealousy. There were so many shades of blue and green that his eyes could not register all of them.

Waterfalls fell down the mountainside like molten masses of silver. The reefs beyond the headlands showed through the lucent sea in ribands of amber, ruby, jade and amethyst. Birds that gleamed like flames flew out from the massive forest trees.

A butterfly that was velvet black and striped with orange diagonals softly brushed his hand, rested for a moment on his shoulder.

"Och," he said aloud, "it's a bonnie, bonnie land. A fine place to make love—aye, to a lass like Stephanie."

He swung around, for 'midships the blacks had started to play their drums. Then a drum from the *Jason,* the English ship, answered. Bakatar commanded there, and it was he who played that drum.

Bakatar silenced the other drums. His beat increased and quickened, was like a vast shout, and then as low, as gentle as a lullaby.

It was a song for the land, Donall recognized. Bakatar was giving tribute to his gods, thanking them for deliverance from the sea. Now the drum notes mounted again, crescendo upon crescendo, until in the brain they were like those mountains, and the smoke-bannered volcano that rose above them all.

The notes fell, as the waterfalls along the mountainsides, and then became a rustling no louder than the breeze, a sibilance that enmeshed with the sounds of the sea, the canvas of the sails.

When they stopped, Donall thought his heart had stopped. He wanted to cry out, curse at Bakatar. But Bakatar was erect by the rail of the *Jason,* pointing ahead to the western horizon.

A corvette stood over the horizon. She came fast and right on their course. The French ensign was at her gaff, her gunports were hauled, the big brass pieces forward ready to fire.

"It's a guard-ship," Donall called to Bakatar. "She'll take us in to Fort Royal. Make no trouble with her. We'll be all right."

The ensign who boarded the *Aventurier* from the corvette was a young man with a new mustache. He spoke explosively in bad English, waved his hands.

"Talk French," Donall said. "This ship belongs to M'sieur Théophile Renec, and I work for him."

The ensign fingered his mustache and made a choking noise. "If you work for M'sieur Renec," he said, "what have you done to his ship, and what is that other ship?"

"I'll tell M'sieur Renec what happened to his ship when I see him," Donall said. His sense of well being, of triumph, was

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leaving him, and he felt a vague kind of unease that became anger. "That other's an English ship we took as prize. Have you got any objections?"

"*Nom de dieu!*" was all the ensign said.

"Right," Donall said. "God had a hand in it. We were starving, dying of thirst when the Englishman overhauled us. So we came alongside and took her as prize."

"We?" the ensign said.

"Right again," Donall said. "Some of the crew and those black men and women."

"But the blacks are slaves."

"They were," Donall said. "They're not any longer. Let go of that mustache and give my helmsman his course. All you can do now is pilot us into Fort Royal."

THE forts that guarded the port were big and well placed, Donall marked as the *Aventurier* dropped anchor in the bay off the town. But the town itself seemed miserable, built mostly of wood, the houses jammed closely together, and a fine stench floating from it all.

"I gather," he told the ensign, "that M'sieur Renec doesn't live here."

"No," the ensign said. "He lives up at Terrier Rouge, there on the mountain. But you must wait until you've talked with the port captain before you go ashore."

"I'm waiting to talk to no man," Donall said. He moved from the ensign and down the deck to Kip.

"Now I'll go ashore," Donall said. "You must needs stay aboard to watch out for the black folks. Tell Bakatar to bring them all here aboard the *Aventurier*. But there's not much to fear. M'sieur Renec is a big man in this place, will deal quick with these pipsqueak port lads as soon as he knows our story. Bear me a hand to get the small-boat lowered. And, mind, rest easy while I'm gone."

He walked fast up through the town from the long stone quay, not bothering to stop except to ask the way to Terrier Rouge. The people in the streets stared at him and he stared back, frankly curious. There were a lot of military, he saw, men who seemed jaded by the tropic heat and a vast number of folks of mixed blood. Some of the girls were very pretty, smiled at him, their brightly turbaned heads lifted. But he kept on, his face grave, thinking of Stephanie.

The sea was far below, Fort Royal a gray smudge beside the brilliance of the bay when he reached Terrier Rouge. The place was nothing but a hamlet of a few palm thatch huts. The first Negro boy he met directed him to the Renec plantation.

It lay in the middle of hundreds of acres of sugar cane, tobacco and indigo. Ox-drawn wains passed him on the road he followed; and in the tall yellow sweep of the cane he heard the rhythmic crack of cutting knives, low Negro voices and the shouts of an overseer.

The house faced the sea, had been designed in the same style as the family chateau in France. But here the trees were palms, row on row of them, and their fronds made a high, dry clacking sound. It was beautiful, he told himself, but it lacked the peace of that house beside the Loire.

A negro in livery bowed to him at the front door, ushered him into a long hall. "I want to see M'sieur Renec," he said, then stood mopping the sweat and dust of the road from his face.

He waited many minutes after the servant left. A lizard crawled over the tiled floor, making a small sound like chafed silk. It snapped up a fly, slid slowly around his foot and was gone.

"Arragh!" he muttered. "I wonder how Stephanie likes such beasties?"

Then M'sieur Renec came toward him from the end of the hall.

Donall drew himself up straight.

M'SIEUR RENEC wore a wide straw hat and riding boots, carried a sword at his hip. "Georges is here?" he called. "Georges has come with you?"

"No, sir," Donall Kenzie slowly said. "I must tell you that he hasn't. Georges

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suffered a grievous wound in Africa, died of it out to sea."

M'sieur Renec withdrew his outstretched hand. He let his body sag against the wall. "How," he asked, "was Georges wounded? Where are Captain Sigaix, and Houdet?"

"It's quite a story, sir," Donall said. "Perhaps you'd better seat yourself while I tell it to you."

He walked in silence behind M'sieur Renec into a shadowed and cool room, watched the older man hunch down on a divan. M'sieur Renec's face was gray, haggard. Donall did not like to look at it. He kept erect, his hands clasped behind his back as he talked.

"Sigaix and the mates are dead, too," he said. "It happened this way."

He believed several times that M'sieur Renec had dropped into a stupor, become unconscious. But when his voice slowed or he hesitated for words the other gazed at him with a glance of almost violent hate.

"So," M'sieur Renec said, "you sacrificed my son's life, the lives of my officers and a good part of my fortune to your own personal ambition. Power . . . You talk of 'power'—and 'freedom'! The only place you'll find them, dolt, is behind the bars of the jail of Fort Royal. You've committed an act of piracy. You've liberated blacks, led them against innocent and honest whites."

"Against Englishmen," Donall said, "who would have let us die of thirst. I repeat, the English captain passed us by laughing. He—"

"Enough!" M'sieur Renec said. He pushed up from the divan and with his open hand struck Donall across the jaw. "You know nothing of law, nothing of the needs and rights of men."

"You'd have me leave, then?" Donall said, his voice uneven and harsh. "You'd have me get out of here?"

"No, not that," M'sieur Renec said. "I'm going to hold you for an accounting of what's happened. You'll stay here until the police are called. My overseers will run you down, trap you like a hare if you try to leave. You understand me?"

"Fully," Donall said.

CHAPTER XII

MAN OUT OF THE NIGHT

HE WAS unware of when M'sieur Renec left the room and when Stephanie entered it. Tears filled his eyes—tears of rage and helplessness.

He had done his best, he thought. He had attempted to act bravely and openly as a man—help others, weaker men—and this was the end of it. Here in the house of his one good friend he had been accused and treated as a criminal.

"Come out from here, Donall," Stephanie said, and touched him on the arm. "Come into the garden and walk with me."

He gazed at her as if she were a person he did not know. He groped and took her hands, held them very tight. "You don't hate me, too—" he said. "You think I didn't do wrong?"

"I don't know," she said. "I heard only the last of your words to my father. Here; we will go this way."

The sunlight made him straighten, brush the tears from his cheeks. He faced Stephanie and saw that she wore a printed, low-cut frock, and was deeply tanned. "It was you I feared," he said. "Not your father."

"Start at the beginning," she said, "and tell all of it to me."

They crossed and recrossed the garden as he told her. He gave to her a description of that African village, and of Georges before the little, squinting chief; of the blacks in the ship's stockade, and Bakatar playing the drum while Bakatar's people rowed forward into range of the English guns.

Stephanie let him speak without interruption. She walked soundless at his side for some time after he was finished.

"I regret my brother's death," she said, "not only because he was very dear to me but also because my father loved him

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deeply. And in time he would have had a good influence on you, made you calmer, more logical, just by his presence with you as your friend."

She lightly took Donall's hand, walked holding it. "You, Donall Kenzie," she said, "have chosen a long and lonely road. You're not a cheap man, nor a small one. But your hatred of injustice and oppression has carried you too far, because you don't think before you act.

"When I first met you in France, you were an embittered exile and ready, should life go against you, to become a renegade. Now, through acts that you believe honest and decent, you have become that—a renegade, a pirate. Why, Donall? You must realize that no one man can fight the world alone."

There were so many words he wished to say that he could not speak. His hand went to his sword belt, gathered until the heavy leather twisted double. Down below the terrace where he and Stephanie stood was another stretch of lawn that led to the slave quarters.

Those were low, one-story buildings made of wattled clay and palm thatch. In the open space before them were a dozen or more heavy posts set firmly in the ground and three big, iron cages.

Black men naked except for soiled breech clouts were in the cages. Two of them were dead, and the third barely stirred. His head and back were covered with festering sores, and his fingers were bent claw-like from gripping at the bars. A guttural murmuring came from him that was answered by the men chained to the stakes.

The men at the stakes had been heavily beaten. Bastinado blows had laid ridged cuts along the spines. Blood had dried, crusted on the cuts. Flies crawled over it. Mongrel dogs from the huts sniffed at the chained ankles, then went to crouch beside the cages holding the dead.

The men at the stakes spoke to each other and to the men in the cage. They said that this could not last forever.

DONALL KENZIE brought his glance back to Stephanie. His confusion and sense of shock were gone. He was very calm. "What," he said, "have those men done?"

"The men in the cages," Stephanie said, "tried to escape. Those at the stakes refused to obey the overseer's orders."

"I think," he said, "that I know you well enough to say you can't call such as that just."

"No," she said; "it's terrible, inhuman. But the world is cruel, all of our supposed civilization is cruel."

He took a few paces from her and returned. "I had great admiration for your people, for the French," he said. "You helped my people in our fight against our oppressors. Your brother Georges believed in the same things I do, gave his life for them.

"But now I realize that you're as bad as the English. What is justice to you has no meaning to me. It's wrong and I'll fight all my life to change it. The black people I brought from Africa are brave, and proud. They'll die, the whole lot of them, before they'll become slaves like these."

Pallor had risen up Stephanie's throat into her face. A vein throbbed blue in her forehead. But her eyes came squarely to meet his gaze.

"You're right, Donall," she said. "Slavery like this should not exist. But you have chosen the wrong way to change it. You need other men—white men, and many of them—to help you. And when you seized the English ship you alienated yourself from them, cut yourself off from getting their sympathy and support.

"My father would have helped you if you'd stayed inside the law, appealed to his sense of justice. But now you're a man all but convicted of piracy and an act of violence. To do any good, you must keep within the law, work with peaceful means."

"You'll help me?" he said.

"Yes, I will," she said.

"When?"

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"As soon as your affairs are straight with my father and you've satisfied the laws of this colony for what you've done."

"Stephanie," he said. "I'm in love with you. You think like a man, and better than most men. If you—" He reached out to kiss her.

She kept herself back from him. "Not now, Donall," she said. "This is no time to make love." She smiled, her eyes tender. "You should be hungry, you must want to clean up a bit before dinner."

"A cool-headed wench," he said, but she had already started for the house, and did not turn or stop.

THEY dined alone. M'sieur Renec had ridden in to Fort Royal, the butler said in answer to Stephanie's question. He had asked that they go ahead without him.

"I'm glad," Stephanie said. "It's a pleasure if not an honor to be hostess to a piratical Scot."

"You'll make a man out of me despite myself," Donall said. There was an earthenware *cruche* of rum beside him, and he filled his glass. "Here's to you, and to me, Stephanie."

"Here's to your lawful future," Stephanie said.

Donall drank a lot of rum while they sat there. He was experiencing a feeling of reaction. He was elated, excited. He told Stephanie old stories of Glen Cluagh, then of his dream for a land of free men somewhere in the islands.

When they left the table and went out to the garden before the house it was deep night. Stars were up in a vast white-silver powdering across the sky. Fireflies gave ruddy glints of light upon the dewed grass. The night throbbed with a faint but powerful pulsation that seemed to take the same beat as his blood.

Martinique, he thought. You're here, here with Stephenie. He spoke her name. She turned, came into his arms.

"Tell me that you love me, Stephanie," he said, his lips against her hair.

"No," she said. "I can't."

"Why not?" Don't you trust a Scotsman?"

"It's not that," she said. "I don't think you're ready yet to trust yourself. You're still to eager to take what's offered you, Donall, and count the cost afterward. This is a beautiful night, and you're a man who's suffered much; you need what tenderness I can give you. Later, perhaps, I'll be able to love you."

"But when?" he said, his arms fierce about her.

"When I'm sure of you."

"Par exemple!" he said. "I'm man enough to have you kiss me, but not enough to have you love me."

"Exactly," she said. "You're big and strong, and not too ugly. But you're rash and full of wild Scottish violence. Right now, tonight, you don't realize what you've done and the forces you put into play when you took that English ship."

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Look down there," she said, "at the road from Fort Royal."

The road made pale loops through the mountainside jungle. The men who climbed it carried lanterns. There were a number of them, and they marched in close military formation.

"Those troops are coming here," he said.

"Yes," she said, "and I think an English officer is with them. An English man-of-war arrived in the port late this afternoon. That's the reason my father left."

"Why didn't you let me know before?" he said.

"Because I wanted these hours with you," she said. "That English man-of-war was sent out to look for the ship you captured. It called in Fort Royal twice last week."

Donall Kenzie felt the sweat beads form cold on his brow. He touched the Claymore hilt, his breath quick in his throat. "I'll fight," he said, "if any Englishman tries to arrest me."

"You'll be a fool if you do," she said. "You'll disregard every word you and I have passed between us."

"But what else am I to do?" he said.

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"I won't be collared like any common sheep stealer!"

"Donall," she said, standing close and looking up into his eyes, "don't fight and you'll be all right. Keep your temper and maybe you can reason with these men, show them the honesty behind your actions. Promise me you'll keep your temper?"

"Yes," he said. "I'll promise you that, Stephanie. But I can't pledge you that if they force me I won't fight."

"Then your promise is no good," she said, and swung, went running into the house.

He cursed, started after her and stopped. The troops were near, marched at the quick-step through the cane. M'sieur Renec was with them, riding at the head of the column beside the two officers. One of the officers was the young French ensign who had boarded the *Aventurier*.

The other wore the tunic of the English King, but also a Scottish bonnet and kilts. That man was his brother, Martin. It was Martin who had been sent by the English for him . . . .

CHAPTER XIII

A SCOTSMAN'S CHANCE

DONALL KENZIE drew the Claymore out, hefted it. "Come no closer, Martin!" he called. "You do, I'll clip your traitor's head from your shoulders. You're no more brother to me."

The ensign gave a quick command and the troops deployed as skirmishers out across the lawn. They were local, island militia—men in tail coats and ill-fitting gaiters, who held their muskets as if afraid of them. He'd have no trouble with that lot, Donall thought, nor much with the ensign and M'sieur Renec.

Martin was the man to watch. Martin was advancing straight toward him.

"I've been ordered by my superior officer," Martin said, "to find the man who seized the English brig, *Jason*. I have here a warrant for his arrest, issued and signed by the governor of this colony. M'sieur Renec has told me that it was you who captured the *Jason*. Is that right?"

"Aye," Donall said. "Right as right can be. But I've warned you. Stand back, man, or I'll kill you! Are you doubly a traitor, to trap your own brother for a few shillings for the Sassenach?"

"Drop your sword, Donall," Martin said. "You have no chance against us. The French troops, too, are here to carry out your arrest."

Donall laughed and sprang, the Claymore whirling. "I've chance," he said, "to finish you."

Martin had an English sword; a light, thin-bladed weapon with a basket hilt. He used it expertly, keeping his guard well up. He spoke to the ensign and M'sieur Renec as he parried Donall's first blows. "I'll handle him," he told them. "I know his style."

That gave Donall added fury. He drove Martin back, and back again, his strokes timed to his strides, flailing the Claymore down upon Martin's blade. He studied his brother's eyes, waiting for them to flicker, change with fear or fatigue. But they did not change, even when he forced Martin down on one knee.

Martin made a rapid upward stroke as the Claymore drummed overhead. He caught Donall through the bicep of his left arm, sent him reeling. A gasp came from Donall, and a Gaelic curse. "You could ha' stuck me through then," he said. "What stopped you?"

"My orders are," Martin said, "to bring you before the law alive. But surrender or I'll be forced to hurt you bad."

"You'll have no need for orders with your head rolling the lawn," Donall said. "Take this, for your Southron pay!"

He hit with all his force, sidewise and then down in a great, looped blow. The shock of it made Martin's blade whimper, shiver leaping out of his grasp. Martin stood straight. There was a pistol in his belt, but he kept his hands lowered. "Go ahead, brother," he said. "You've won this one fair. If you want my life, take it."

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"No," Donall said in a thick voice. "No, pick up your sword. I cannot kill you defenseless. You've fought brave, and well."

The Frenchmen were crowding forward. The militia sergeant put his musket against Donall's chest, bawled a sentence Donall did not understand. Men were behind him, all around. M'sieur Renec had drawn his sword, and the ensign had a pistol raised.

They have you, Donall thought. You might kill Martin, but they've got you cornered like a badger and it's your own fool fault.

Then Stephanie came in past the militiamen. She faced her father. "You can settle this, *mon père,*" she said, "and without more fighting. Remember that Donall Kenzie was your son's good friend. They went together to Africa, and in Africa they both would not suffer to see people made slaves."

M'SIEUR RENEC'S glance to her was slow and hard. "You speak of Africa and what happened there," he said. "But whose word have you for it but this madman's? Can you believe what he says?"

"Yes," Stephanie said. "What else he might be, he's not a liar. When he told me Georges went ashore in Africa to free the black people, I didn't doubt him. I know Georges would have done such a thing.

"It very possibly could have been Georges who escaped, to come to Martinique as Donall Kenzie has. And Georges would have fought the same way against the English ship. He, too, wouldn't have let his people die of hunger and thirst."

M'sieur Renec lowered his sword, put it in the scabbard. He looked at Donall Kenzie for a long moment, then back at his daughter. "What would you have me do, Stephanie?" he said.

"A very simple thing," she said. "Withdraw your charges against Donall. True, he freed your slaves and used them to fight and seize an English ship. But he's no pirate, and in proof of that he brought the *Adventurier* and the blacks and the English ship straight here to Martinique. If he had sought to be a pirate, he could have hidden in some other island, kept what he'd won as loot."

"You make him out to be an innocent man," M'sieur Renec said.

"I make him out," Stephanie said, "to be a man who doesn't clearly understand the difference between right and wrong. Until now, he's thought that his own personal belief was sufficient law."

M'sieur Renec made a shrugging gesture. "When women are allowed to be lawyers in France," he said, "you'll be the first. But how about the English ship, and the damage done to her and her crew?"

Stephanie swung a bit. She gazed at Martin Kenzie. "Not all of the *Jason's* crew were killed," she said. "The survivors are in Fort Royal. They're able to tell you what their captain did before Donall decided to fight the *Jason.*"

"I've already talked with them," Martin said.

"And they told you?"

"That their captain disregarded Donall's request for water and supplies."

"So there was some reason for Donall to attack."

"*Oui, mam'selle.*" Martin's face was flushed, his body rigid. "In a sense, he was right in what he did. But still he seized that ship, killed and wounded a great many of her crew, sailed her into a French port as a prize."

"You are in the English service, Lieutenant," Stephanie said. "You know very well that right now relations are strained between France and England. There's talk of war, and war here in the colonies. Such an incident as this of the *Jason* might bring it about. Do you want to be responsible for it?"

"No," Martin said, "I don't."

"Then," Stephanie said, "go back to whoever sent you here, and make it plain that the *Jason* is still English property. An English crew can take her out of Fort Royal tomorrow, sail her any place they

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wish. The dead can't be brought alive, but the ship is what your superiors really want."

DONALL had stood motionless, caught by a conflict of emotions that were too complex for expression. He felt resentment for what Stephanie had done in coming between him and Martin; but he was moved by admiration for the way she had spoken to her father, by the way she now made Martin accept everything she said.

He watched Martin half smiling, still ready to wheel on him or any man with the Claymore.

But Martin had just made a bow to Stephanie and said, "I agree with your point of view, *mam'selle,* and will report on it to my superiors. I must insist, though, that Donall be kept here until I've had time to report. Donall, do you give me your word of honor you'll stay in M'sieur Renec's custody until I return?"

"Listen, you cateran!" Donall said. "Your honor and mine are not the same, never will be. You—"

"Be quiet, Donall," Stephanie said. She placed her hand across his mouth. "You must stay here. There must be peace."

Martin had moved back a pace. "Then I may have your word," he asked Stephanie, "instead of my brother's?"

"Yes," Stephanie said.

"That's enough for me," Martin said. "How about you, ensign?"

"I am fully satisfied," the ensign said. He bowed to Stephanie and M'sieur Renec gave a command to his sergeant.

The men formed and wheeled out into the road. But Martin waited there for several seconds, his glance on Donall. "Don't betray the lass," he called in Gaelic. "I don't matter, but she does."

Donall laughed. "You're lucky to be alive," he said. "It was only the lass who saved your life."

FOR a time Donall thought it was the mosquitoes he heard in his troubled sleeping. Then he knew it was the pipes, and that Kip played them. He was fully awake as he rose and went to the window of his room.

The pipe was the famous old one of the '45, and the words to it were:

Then look for no peace,
For the wars shall never cease
Till the King shall enjoy his own again.

Kip was out somewhere in the cane, hidden by the pearl-bodied mists of dawn. The pipes stopped, squawked out on a low note. Donall answered, whistling the chorus twice over. Then he pulled on his kilt and brogans, took his Claymore from where he had put it under the pillow when M'sieur Renec had brought him to this room.

He closed his hand about the Claymore kilt, spoke to the sword as if it were alive. "From what Kip would tell me," he said, "there's need again for you soon."

Stephanie met him in the hall. Her *peignoir* was flung loosely about her shoulders and her feet were bare. "Where are you going?" she said.

"Out to meet my piper," Donall said. "He just called me."

"I heard him," she said. "But were you willing to leave here without my knowledge?"

Donall strode swiftly along the hall to her. The warmth of sleep was still in her cheeks, and her hair lay dark and tousled about her throat and the little, starched collar of her nightgown.

"You're a lovely bit, Stephanie," he said. "I want always to be with you. But I must go now to see why Kip has come here. In all our talking last night not a word was said about the black people to whom I pledged freedom. But my idea was they were not to be bothered."

She shook her head in an expression of outright anger. "You're a most difficult man," she said. "You demand everything. Those blacks couldn't be left aboard the *Adventurier* or the *Jason.* Nor could they be allowed to roam loose through the island."

"Where are they now?" Donall said, grasping her by the arms.

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"Some place ashore," she said. "Probably in Fort Royal."

"What's been done to them?"

"I haven't been told in detail. But my father gave me to understand that they were to be held in custody by command of the Governor."

"In order," Donall said, "that they may be used later as slaves. Ah, girl, would you try to keep me here when a thing like that is done to innocent, decent people?"

"Donall," she said gravely, "I lack the will and the strength to keep you here if you really desire to go. You would evade me and a thousand more like me to satisfy what you think is your sense of honor.

"Go now, if you want, and go fast. But I'll make a prophecy about you. Until the day you learn that no single man or group of men can fight the world, you'll be unhappy and a renegade. I've saved you, and your brother has saved you. Yet you persist, and in the end you must save yourself."

"Another job for the future, then," he said, and grinned. But she backed from him as he sought to kiss her, and as he went down the stairs to the ground floor he could hear the muffled sound of her weeping.

Kip's kilt was mired with mud, filled with brambles. "'Tis through the bush I came to reach this place," he told Donall. "Yon in the town their cow-foot militia chased hot after me fair a while. They would throw me in their jail with the black folks. But once I was on the mountain I was safe and they did no' follow far."

Donall stared back at the house. Dogs barked there. M'sieur Renec raised his voice in a shout and overseers dressed in no more than their small clothes ran across the lawns.

"This lot will hunt better," Donall said. "They use those great, brute dogs to catch up their runaway slaves. Let us get to the town. Did Bakatar and the rest of them fight when the French took them prisoner?"

"Bakatar kept his people from it," Kip said. "He's a vurra smart laddie, that one. He saw full well there was little in a fight, what wi' the cannons of the forts right there and the bay packed by French men-of-war and that Sassenach seventy-five gun ship off the *Aventurier's* bow."

"He'll have to fight later, though," Donall said. "He and his folk will be sold as slaves if they don't. Now pick up your heels and run. Renec has had the courtesy to set his dogs on us."

THEY ran for hours down that mountainside, through cane brakes and thickets of bamboos, huge, sharp-spined cactus plants and then in the deep, sunless forest. Their stride was that of the Highlands, loping and steady, and they outdistanced the men who followed them; but once the dogs came close.

The dogs were big, tough mastiffs, and they charged in a savage rush. Donall slapped in the skull of one with the Claymore, and Kip wounded another pair with his pistol. "A nasty breed," Kip muttered. "Ye notice, Donall, how they leapit straight at the throat?"

"They'll leap no more," Donall said. "That time we took all the spirit out of them. Let us wait here and rest. We can do no good in the town until it's dark."

They stood in a small savannah made by a fallen tree. They climbed along the trunk and up onto the huge mass of the roots. Then they swarmed hand over hand along the rope-like lianas hanging from a redwood tree, and made themselves comfortable on its upper branches.

"Yon's the town and the sea," Kip said. "They grow tall trees in this land."

"And a fine kind of hate," Donall said. He was gazing down at Fort Royal, where he had marked the English ship lying to double anchor beyond the *Aventurier*. "I'm ready now to drub every cateran in the place for thrusting those black folk in jail. Yesterday at M'sieur Renec's I saw what they do to their slaves. It would fair turn your stomach, Kip."

"I ken as much," Kip said. "They've got a gibbet and a whipping post in front of their jail."

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Birds came to rest in the trees as the day passed. Monkeys leaped about below, scratching and gabbling. But at dusk the jungle hushed, then took up all the night sounds. A bat almost swept off Kip's bonnet and he swore, swayed wildly on the branch.

"I'm so empty," he said, " a good gust 'd float me oot tae sea. Let's us start from here, Donall."

"Aye," Donall said. "It's time."

They entered the town from a dark side alley where negro urchins played in the gutter and cats prowled the lizards. "Theres only one thing for us to do," Donall said. "Get to the jail and free the blacks, then try to board the *Aventurier* and sail her out."

"A madcap plan," Kip grunted. "But maybe mad enough tae work."

The prison was off the great main square behind the cathedral. Bells tolled in the cathedral and a mass was being held there. The people crowding toward the steps did not notice them where they slipped along beside the walls, and their breathing lengthened as they reached the prison gate.

A pair of white guards armed with halberds guarded it. "He to the left is mine," Donall whispered, "the other yours. Then straight in."

The guards yelled and hacked out with the halberds, but the heavy Scottish swords worked fast. Donall pulled the body of his man back into the shadows, took the ring of keys from his belt. Kip was already at the gate, prying the lock with his sword point.

"Here," Donald said, and pitched him the keys.

It seemed that the jail yard was packed solid with black humanity. Eyes flashed luminously and teeth showed, then Bakator's voice boomed. "*À moi!*" Donall called. "It's us, the Scottish. We've come to take you out. Tell your people to follow us to the ship."

They went in a stamping, yelling mass from the jail yard.

Troops were in the streets now, militiamen and marines from the fleet. The Negroes charged them empty-handed and with instant, reckless abandon. They ripped loose muskets, pikes and cutlasses; then, reforming behind the two kilted men and Bakatar, ran for the quay.

Musket balls caromed off the pillars of the houses in the streets through which they ran. The cathedral bell was stilled. A trumpet sounded back in the town and then others out aboard the ships.

"They'll be waiting for us," Donall said to Kip and Bakatar. "But the English man-of-war lies close to the *Aventurier*. The French will be afraid to fire until the *Aventurier* is away from her. We've got a chance—a good chance."

CHAPTER XIV

THE SASSENACH COME

THEY boarded the *Aventurier* from every sort of thing that would float. The guards on deck were flung or jumped overside. Donall parted the anchor cable with half a dozen halberd strokes, swung aft to take the wheel.

Kip was at the fore halyards, sending canvas aloft, and the blacks hauled in unison on the main brace. The ship had weigh; she was bound out into the bay.

Gunners were lighting fuses aboard the English man-of-war. A salvo of culverin fire came from the French forts on the headlands, but the big pieces were still silent.

Bakatar was taking his best men to the *Aventurier's* cannon. They cleared the pieces quickly, Kip in command over them. Kip knew no African language and very little French, but his wide-armed gesture toward the sputter of the English gunners' fuses was enough.

The broadside hammered the man-of-war right above the water line. She heeled to it and came back in time to catch the second burst. *"Greas ort!"* Kip yelled, giving the battle shout of the Bonnie Prince. "Noo ye know us, ye rascals!"

Martin was aboard that ship, Donall Kenzie realized. Martin was there, climbing up into the rigging to the fighting-tops

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with the others of the Scottish complement. He saw the kilts and the flicker of the bare legs, then made out Martin's face in a musket flare.

"No, Martin," he said. "Not tonight do you stop me, nor for many a night. Go talk to the lass on the mountain and make your dour faces at her. You're better off dealing with women than with fighting men."

The *Aventurier* had picked up full weigh, was slanting broad-hauled before the land breeze. Now the fort cannon were working, and sent great round shot through the upper gear. But the English man-of-war had hauled her anchor, had also started for sea.

The French cannon stopped their fire. There was a moment in which all the night was quiet except for the echoes from the mountainsides.

Then the blacks began to sing. It was their song of freedom, and Donall joined with them. They were free, he knew. They had won this one, were headed safe out into the open board.

Kip came to take the helm when Martinique was well astern. "Where are we bound?" he asked. "For the South'ard and the Spanish isles?"

"I must talk with Bakatar," Donall said. "That is something we must well consider."

He found Bakatar 'midships, binding the wounds of one of the black men. He and Bakatar shook hands, smiled into each other's eyes. "A good night," Donall said.

"A very good one," Bakatar said. "We've lost only three dead and five wounded. There is a town man here, a slave who was in the jail with us. He tells me that he has sailed these islands in his master's schooner. Over to the west is an island where he believes we'll be all right."

"We must be sure," Donall said.

"So," Bakatar said. "But let him tell you. Here he is."

The slave was a little man in a pair of faded sailor's trousers. He spoke in soft, slow French and first told Donall that his name was Pinou.

"This island is straight west four days of sailing from Fort Royal. It has a hidden cove on the north side, and once a volcano was there. But the volcano is finished, dead. Up on the cliff above the cove is a fresh water spring. We used to put in there to fill our water casks and catch the big turtles and crabs. People, a lot of people, could live on those and the fish in the cove."

"How do you call this place?" Donall said.

"Ile Volcane," Pinou said. "My master discovered it. But he went back to France last year, and I was sold to a man in Fort Royal. That man beat me, and I ran away. The *gendarmes* caught me, and they took me to the jail, and the judge said—"

"As many people as this need more to eat than just turtle, fish and crabs," Donall said. "How big is Ile Volcane"

Pinou counted on his fingers. "Ten times the length of your ship," he said. "Four times as wide. And if you have yams among your supplies you can plant them. Later, you can go to the other islands for vegetables and fruit."

"You're a man we can use, Pinou," Donall said. "Come aft and show me where you think Ile Volcane is on the chart. Then take a watch at the wheel."

ILE VOLCANE was like a vast gray stone fist thrust up from the sea. Waves broke in endless splendor against its sides. Sea birds that had made the cliff tops white rose in clamor from the crater of the old volcano as Donall hove to the *Aventurier* offshore.

He and Kip and Bakatar went ashore to inspect it with Pinou at the tiller of the small boat.

"See," Pinou said. "Here many reefs to catch any ship that comes too close. The cove's in there, on the side away from the trade wind."

"But it's not large enough to take the *Aventurier*," Donall said. "We'll have to sink her if we stay."

Kip squinted at him. "Ye'll be content to stay here for any length of time?"

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"Aye, and most certain," Donall said. "A bit of peace will be fine after all the brawling we've done. Now jump overside and give a hand to get the boat inshore. We must have all the folks landed before dark."

They built a great five on the beach of the cove that night, and by it laboriously hauled the *Adventurier* in past the reefs. The blacks did not sleep, but went scrambling all over the island. They came back with gulls' eggs and black sulphur from the volcano crater, bitter sea-grapes that they spit out as soon as they put them in their mouths. Their movements, their voices had the gayety of children, and even Bakatar was affected by their spirit.

Donall and Kip kept a little apart from them, made strangely aware of their white blood. "Why do they act so" Kip said. "They're like folks gone fey, or childer oot frae the dominie's classes."

"It's that they're tasting liberty," Donall said. "Many of them have never had it before. Here will be their home, and under no man's rule but their own. Come up the cliff with me, and bring your pipes."

"Och, that I understand," Kip said. "Ye'd like to be hearin' the auld Scottish airs. Tonight, Donall Kenzie, yeer heart's full wi' thought of Glen Cluagh."

Donall made no reply, was moving to climb the cliff. He sat on the highest crag, that which faced the north and west. "Play all of them, Kip," he said. "Each one you know. But first let us have the Kenzie call."

Kip stood with the warm and fragrant wind dragging his ragged kilt. He lifted his head so that the moonlight was in his eyes, and the silver bands on the drones of the pipes shone.

Then he began to march, back and forth along the cliff edge. It was the way he had marched in the great hall of the Kenzie house on St. Andrew's Day, when the haggis had been brought from the kitchen with a whooping yell and every drinking horn had been full of usquebaugh.

The pipes had a weird quality as he played. They were muted by the clashing of the waves against the cliffs, the cries of the gulls, the shouting and the singing of the blacks.

"Donall," he said suddenly, "I can't give ye more. 'Tis no' the place fair the pipes. This—this is fair the black folk."

Donall reached and clasped him by the shoulder. "You're right, man," he said. "And thank you for the trying. In the morning, we'll sink the ship in the cove. Then the blacks will be safe from sight of any craft that passes. They'll have the timber for their house walls, the canvas for roofs. The cannon we'll haul up here and emplace for them. Soon they'll have a bonnie life."

"And us, Donall?"

"I must go back to Martinique. I left there like a sheep-rieving thief. But that's no sign you should go with me. We'll take the big sailing boat when we go, and I'll put you safe into one of the Spanish islands. Then you'll have to make out as best you can."

"You left Martinique," Kip said, "to keep your promise to the blacks. That shames you not at all. Yet if you go back, I go, too."

He took his bonnet off, touched the silver brooch at the side. "Yeer father, the Kenzie, gave it tae me the day I came to play the pipes in the great hall. I've worn it ever syne. I'm more than clansman to ye, Donall, and more than piper. I'm yeer *leine-chrione,* the one who guards his chief from any harm."

Donall kept silent. He watched the moon on the sea, the serried, soft piling of cloud before the wind. Glen Cluagh was there, he thought, far, far distant over the horizon. Sassenach had it now; red-coated men marched the lochside.

But it was also here, in his heart and in Kip's heart. Their memories could never be taken from them, would last as long as they lived. That recognition gave him calmness, and he was able to speak.

"I thank you, Kip," he said. "If it'd please you, stay with me."

"It'd please me muckle," Kip said. "But sleep noo, aye, mon?"

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"Aye," Donall said.

They stretched out rolled in their plaids, fell asleep to the insistent cadence of the sea.

BAKATAR had chosen to build his village high up within the crater rim. He walked down from there with Donall and Kip the day they left the island. "We have everything we need," he said. "Our life will be good here."

Donall stared out into the cove where the hulk of the *Aventurier* had been sunk, then back up at the cliffs where in the last few days all of them had toiled to emplace the cannon.

"You'll stop a fleet with those," he said. "That black stuff down in the bottom of the crater can be made into gunpowder, and I've shown Pinou how it's done. In a month or so you can send Pinou and some of the other men to one of the islands to get seeds for your crops. But we'll be back to see you once we're straight in Martinique."

"You're sure you're right in going?" Bakatar said.

"Absolutely." Donall smiled at him. "There's a girl over there whose respect and love I want more than anything else in the world."

"Then I can only say good luck and goodbye, my friend," Bakatar said. He stood on the beach until they had waded out to the big, sail-rigged boat. But then he swung up the trail to the cliff. They saw him there as they cleared the cove and headed out to sea. His black people stood about him, and their hands were raised in a final sign of farewell.

Donall held the boat steadily east, straight into the eye of the sun. The nervous tension that had been upon him during the last week was gone. He was going back now, he told himself, and to Stephanie. The French could throw him in that stinking prison if it pleased them, but he'd get out, return again to her.

Stephanie was the girl he loved. She was all of what was still good and decent in his life. . . .

He sang, cradling the tiller handle under his elbow, and Kip glanced up at him. "Ye're happy, mon," Kip said.

"Aye," Donall said. "For a renegade, I feel right bonnie."

The wind freshened that night, came with half-gale force out of the north. Sprays broke over the boat's broad gunwale and Donall clewed the lugsail short, put Kip to work with the bailing scoop.

It was near midnight, he thought, when they raised the first of the huge line of English men-of-war. That first one was a seventy-five gun ship, went hammering down-wind past them with a thrashing roar of gear and canvas.

No stars were out and the ships were lightless. They hurled up out of the dark, palely marked by their bow wash and wakes, then were gone in massive blocks of shadow.

"Forty of them," Kip said. "All grand, braw craft and hauled ready fair fightin'. Any one of them could ha' split us like a puncheon. Is there war aboot, Donall, that such a lot of the Sassenach ships would be sailin' the sea at once?"

"There's been talk of war between the Sassenach and the French," Donall said. "And this must be it. You saw where they were heading?"

"On our same course," Kip said. "For Martinique."

"They're on their way to Fort Royal. The ship in which Martin serves came there to find more than a captured merchant brig."

"You'll keep on," Kip said, "an' go to Martinique?"

"Surely, I will," Donall said. "I have no liking for the French, but I've got deep hate for the Sassenach. If there's fighting to be done, I'll be with the French."

AT DAWN the wind all but failed. They could see the English fleet to the south, becalmed, the clumsy, high-pooped vessels slowly wallowing.

"We'll beat them in now," Donall said. "There's wind enough for us, but they must wait for a stiff breeze."

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"Our luck is back," Kip said.

"Part of it," Donall said. "That's a mighty fleet, stronger than the French."

They landed the boat several miles up the coast from Fort Royal, made it fast to a mangrove root, then took to the bush. That was past noon and by nightfall they were still on the mountainside.

Kip was exhausted, his face puffed blue by mosquito and chigger bites. "Leave me, Donall," he said. "Go on and warn the folks yeerself. I'll catch ye up."

"No," Donall said, and hefted him over his shoulder. "We'll take to the open trail. I've been afraid some patrol would come upon us and stop us. But now any military we meet will take us direct to M'sieur Renec."

A sergeant's patrol of a dozen troopers guarded the road below the village at Terrier Rouge. The sergeant laughed and waved his hands when Donall told him about the English fleet. *"Incroyable,"* he said. "I doubt you."

"Doubt me or no," Donall said, "but take us to M'sieur Renec."

A mounted officer galloped by them as they crossed through the cane to the Renec plantation. He turned and yelled at the sergeant, then went on faster.

"You doubt him?" Donall asked the sergeant. "He just said the English fleet has put men ashore at Fort Royal."

"Please," the sergeant said. "I'm a man with a family, and they're down there in the town. Go ahead alone. Tell what you know to M'sieur Renec."

White overseers bearing muskets formed a line in front of the house. M'sieur Renec was behind them in the doorway with the sweaty officers and Stephanie. He closed his hand on his pistol butt as he saw the two kilted men.

But then Stephanie ran past him and down the steps. "You can't stay here," she said. "We don't want you or need you. Go away before you're shot."

A trembling passed from Donall's legs through his body. "You may not want us," he said, "but you'll need us. Forget what's happened, Stephanie. There's a war now, and we're trained fighting men."

"But how can we trust you?" she said. "You betrayed me, betrayed my father."

Donall said, "If you're afraid of our loyalty, a pistol shot apiece will finish us. But there's work to be done. This place should be fortified, a trench dug across the lawn, a barricade put up in the doorway."

The French officer had come down the steps. He was a major, a stocky man with a scarred face. "What he says is sense," he said to Stephanie. "We've got need of experienced fighting men. Get over there, you two, and draw muskets and ammunition."

Donall glanced shortly at him. "They're coming," he said. "You hear them on the road?"

"Yes," the major said, "I do."

There was the quick, rough rap of musket fire, and then the blare of bagpipes. "It's Martin's lot," Donall told Kip. "Those who fight for the Sassenach. Remember that they're wearing red coats."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

Swaggering Rogues Strike for France with

The Scarlet Blade

Murray R. Montgomery's Novel of Adventure and Romance

Beginning in the ARGOSY for October 26

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MEN of
LAST OF THE FRONTIERSMEN
ARIZONA BILL WAS ONE YEAR OLD WHEN HE WAS STOLEN BY COMANCHE INDIANS FROM HIS PARENTS' PRAIRIE SCHOONER; BUT HIS LIFE WAS SPARED AND HE WAS ADOPTED INTO THE TRIBE --BECAUSE OF HIS FLAMING RED HAIR. AT 9 HE WAS BOUGHT BY THE SIOUX WHO TAUGHT HIM TO TRAIL, READ SIGN AND FIGHT INDIAN FASHION. HE DIDN'T KNOW HE WAS WHITE UNTIL AT 14 HE JOINED THE ARMY AS A SCOUT, AND NOT UNTIL LONG AFTERWARD DID HE LEARN HIS NAME WAS RAYMOND H. GARDNER!
A SCOUT FOR GEN. CUSTER, BILL, DISGUISED AS A BRAVE, ENTERED SITTING BULL'S CAMP. AN INDIAN MAID WARNED HIM HE WAS SUSPECTED AND HELPED HIM ESCAPE OUT THE BACK OF HIS GUARDED TEPEE. AS HE CRAWLED OUT, A HORSE STEPPED ON HIS HAND, BUT HE MADE NO SOUND AND ESCAPED.
CUSTER DISREGARDED HIS REPORT OF THE INDIAN'S STRENGTH AND HIS TROOP PERISHED. BILL, FORTUNATELY, HAD BEEN SENT ELSEWHERE.

A True Story in Pictures

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DARING
by Stocki Allen
"ARIZONA BILL"
ON HIS FIRST TRIP AS A PONY EXPRESS RIDER HE FOUND A GIRL BOUND READY FOR TORTURE AT A LONELY CAMP. LOOSING HER, HE RODE PELLMELL THROUGH THE INDIANS' CAMP AND REACHED FORT DOUGLAS WITH THE MAIL IN SAFETY!....
... YEARS LATER, WHEN A COWBOY DREW A KNIFE ON HIM IN A SALOON, FARO NELL, LADY GUN-FIGHTER, SHOT THE MAN AND SAVED BILL'S LIFE, THUS REPAYING THE DEBT. SHE WAS THE GIRL'S SISTER!
BILL SCOUTED WITH KIT CARSON, DRANK WITH "BILLY THE KID" AND WAS A FRIEND OF "WILD BILL" HICKOK, "CALAMITY JANE" JUDGE BEAN AND OTHER FA-MOUS CHARACTERS. BROKE, HE ONCE LIVED WITH THE JAMES BOYS, BUT REFUSED TO JOIN THE GANG.
HE GUARDED THE RAILROAD WORKMEN FROM INDIANS, ACTED AS SCOUT FOR THE CAVALRY THAT CAPTURED GERONIMO, WAS A DEPUTY MARSHAL AT DODGE CITY, AN ARIZONA RANGER AND LED THE POSSE THAT TRACKED DOWN THE NOTORIOUS WOMEN HORSE-THIEVES, "CATTLE ANNIE" AND "LITTLE BRITCHES."
BILL DIED IN TEXAS EARLY THIS YEAR--- AT THE RIPE OLD AGE OF 96!

Coming soon: Vidocq—Master Detective

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A Ticket to Freeport

An Argosy Oddity

By CHANDLER WHIPPLE
Author of "Kill Your Own Tigers," etc.

LONG ago Jody Breedlove had discovered without exertion he could span just three of the tamarack logs of the corduroy road at one step of his bare feet. He counted them now. Five hundred and fifty-three times three plus one made sixteen hundred and sixty, and in no time at all he was out of the swamp.

He paused then and looked apprehensively behind him. Back there near the spot where the cowslips bloomed in May, a crow cawed as if deriding his fears. There was no other sound, and the road behind him lay undisturbed beneath the bright August sun.

Come to think of it, maybe his father wouldn't follow after him, anyhow: Ezra Breedlove would guess where he had gone, and likely just wait and lick the tar out of him when he got home that night.

Now, being thirteen, Jody quickly put that thought of the far future behind him, along with the swamp and the past. The important thing was that he had made his getaway, and a big day was ahead. He heard the whistle of the train as it rounded the curve above Edstown, and he broke into a run that did not stop until he had covered the remaining half mile to the station.

He got there in time to pause, breathless, as the engine puffed slowly past him. The fireman was shoving great chunks of wood into the boiler; smoke poured from the funnel-shaped smokestack and cinders rained down upon Jody; but he hardly noticed them, for they were all a part with the clanging bells and the hissing steam and the crowd that tumbled out from the coaches.

THIS was even better than he had expected. The engine was stopping for water, and everybody took this chance to crawl out of the hot, dirty cars and stretch his legs. People poured out and around him, more people than he had hardly ever seen, till he was swept along with the crowd and a part of it, and it gave Jody a new thrill and a sense of being somebody.

He stuck his hands in his pockets and spat, hitting a car-wheel fifteen feet away dead center. He looked up at a tall man who stood beside him.

"Well sir, it's quite a turnout," Jody said importantly.

The tall man nodded with approval, through a face that was rimed with sweat and cinders. He also squared off and spat, not hitting the mark quite as accurately but making it all seem friendly-like. "That's a fact. Why, you'd hardly figure there were that many folks in the world willing to hear the other fellow talk, now would you?"

Jody grinned, then wiped off the grin and administered to the other a look of mild reproof. "This is different," he said.

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"There ain't everybody gets a chance to hear a man like Stephen A. Douglas. He's the greatest man in the United States. And no bigger'n—why, not much bigger'n me."

"Is that the truth?" the other said.

"And look at him!" Jody said. "Look at the way he come right out and spoke up on that Kansas Constitution bill. He sure showed the South where he stood then. Why, he ain't afeared of nothin', Douglas ain't. Why, even them Whigs and such had ought to vote for him after that."

"Yes sir, he did speak up right out loud in meetin' there," the man agreed. "Course, he sort of twisted himself up in his own talk, at that. Seems like his having to stand up on his hind legs for the Kansans showed he'd overstepped himself on this squatter sovereignty business."

"Kind of puts me in mind of a lazy farmer I heard about, name of Simmons. He never was one to put up a fence where a stand of brush would look to do the trick. One day he came along the road and saw some cows in his neighbor's corn. He set to work and drove them out. Took him close to an hour, and it was a hot day. Just as he finished his neighbor came along, looking cool and comfortable as you please.

" 'Well,' says Simmons sore of proudly, 'while you was settin' up there in the shade, I saved your corn crop.'

" 'So I see,' the neighbor said.

" 'Is that all you've got to say?' Simmons wanted to know. Ain't you even got a word of thanks to offer for me workin' in the hot sun for you?'

"The neighbor just grunted. 'They was your cows, wasn't they?' he said."

THIS time Jody burst right out laughing, before he realized what he was doing and stopped himself. 'But that ain't like Mr. Douglas," he said. "That ain't so. Why, you talk like a—a black Republican."

The tall man chuckled heartily. "Son," he said, "I've been called worse names than that."

"I can't figure," said Jody, "what you're goin' to hear Mr. Douglas for if you feel *thataway* about him."

"Well," said the other, "ain't that what Mr. Douglas is speaking for—so he can bring folks over to agreeing with him?"

He spoke as if he were sort of apologizing, and Jody guessed maybe he himself *had* been a little sharp. "He'll bring you over, all right," he assured the man, "if you got any doubts. Ain't nobody can stand up to Mr. Douglas in argument." Then, by way of making amends, he added, "I expect you ain't never been to Freeport."

"No, sir, I haven't."

"Well, I have," Jody assured him. "Been there twice. I know that town. I can show you the courthouse and lead you to where Douglas is goin' to speak."

"Why, I'd take it very kindly of you to do that," said the tall man.

The way he spoke, Jody knew he meant it.

"Course," Jody admitted generously, "I ain't never been there by *railroad*. Fact is, this is my first trip anywheres thataway."

"It's kind of a dusty way to travel," the other said. "You might've done better to take a horse, with less than twenty miles to go."

"We got a horse, all right," Jody told him, "but Pa needed him for stumpin'. Fact is, Pa told me there wasn't time for me to come at all. I snuk off."

Hastily he added, "Not that Pa ain't a good Democrat. Anyhow, I figured I'd ought to try the train. Got to do it sooner or later, I always say. Aimin' to cooch a ride."

The tall man chuckled, and his eyes twinkled as if they were sharing a fine joke together. "How do you figure to work it?" He lowered his voice to a confidential tone. "This Illinois Central, you know, they don't aim to be fooled much."

"Heck," said Jody, "they ain't goin' to see me—not with this crowd. I'll just slip aboard when the rest of the folks does."

He made a casual gesture and grinned

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wisely at the tall man who was attentive.

"Afraid that won't turn the trick," the man told him. "You see, they don't ketch you when you get on. They've got a head man, a conductor, that comes along and takes up tickets after you get on the train. If you don't have a ticket, they'll throw you off."

Jody's face fell. "Do tell," he said. "Why, I hadn't figured they was that smart. Gollies, you think they'll throw me off?"

The man looked solemn and wagged his head slowly.

"They can be mighty mean."

"Gollies. I never thought of that. Why, it's too late for me to walk to Freeport for the speech now."

The tall man smiled. "I've got an idea," he confided.

Jody spat. "Let's hear it."

But wasn't going to put much faith in any ideas this fellow might have. So he waited without interest.

"Well now, I've done some work for this railroad." He fumbled in the pocket of his baggy coat and brought out pencil and paper. He held the paper against the side of the coach and wrote with the stubby pencil. "If the conductor ketches you, you hand him this and maybe it'll get you by. No harm in trying, anyhow."

Jody took the note, smudged with soot, and read it through:

JIM FORBES:

This young man knows what he wants and I think he'd ought to get it. I'd take it as a favor if you could carry him to Freeport.

Yours,

A. LINCOLN

"Thanks," said Jody dubiously. "I'll be much obliged to you, if it works. I sure do want to hear Steve Douglas speak."

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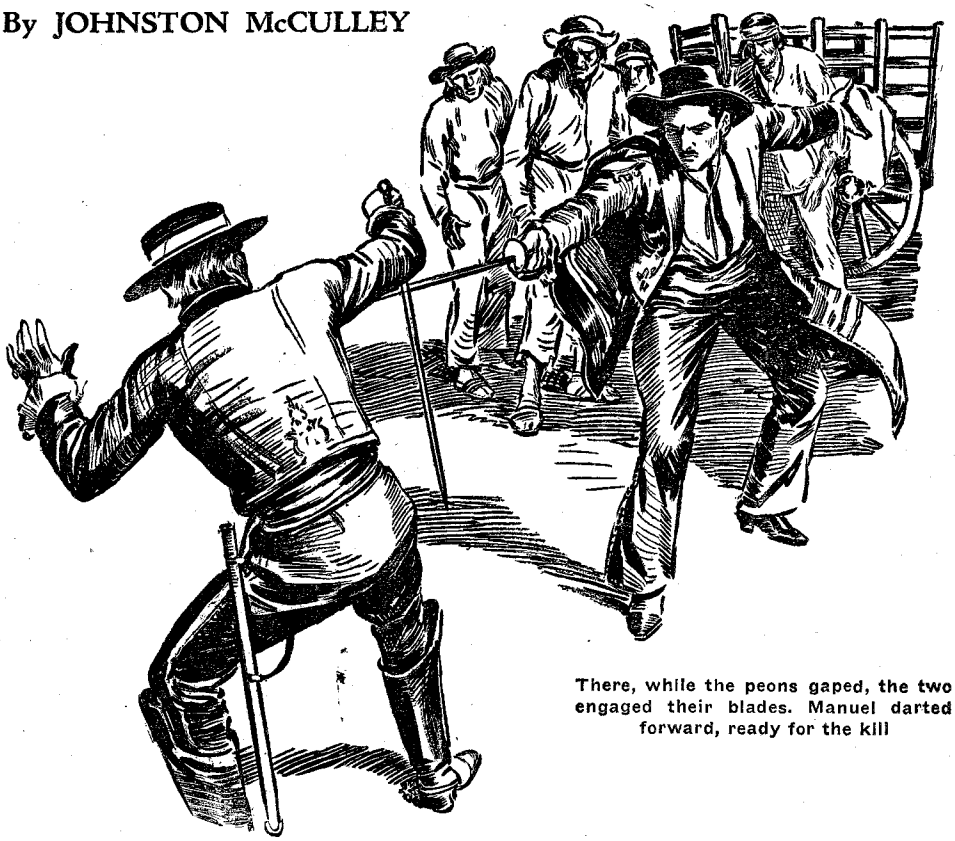
Señor Devil-May-Care

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY



There, while the peons gaped, the two engaged their blades. Manuel darted forward, ready for the kill

FOR a proud and hot-blooded young caballero of Alta California to be put under oath not to use his sword for a period of sixty days can be a fretting experience. Yet DON ESTEBAN DE LA ZAMORA, sometimes known as Señor Devil-may-care, has been forced to accept such restraint. A thoughtless prank has involved him, more or less innocently, in a slight on the honor of the lovely MARIA GODINES, and her two cubbish champions, JUAN FELIZ and MARCOS CHAVEZ, have sworn to have his blood.

The governor seizes upon this situation as a pretext to banish Don Esteban to San Diego de Alcala, where he is to put down a revolt, rumored to have been plotted by DON JOSÉ DEL RIO and the ambitious merchant, MIGUEL BROCAMONTE.

Don Esteban has no difficulty in making Don José abandon his wild scheme; and he manages to sever the connection between the nobleman and Brocamonte. But Don José's wild and ambitious young son, DON MANUEL, is not so easily checked. Having conceived a furious hatred for Don Esteban he hires assassins to attack him. When this scheme fails, due to the expertness of Don Esteban's swordsmanship, Don Manuel breaks openly with his father and rides into the hills to take over the leadership of the rebellious peons whom Brocamonte has stirred up.

THROUGH his agents, JORGE GONZALEZ, and the peon girl, ROSA, Don Esteban learns of this; and when Don José begs him to follow Manuel and bring him to reason, Don Esteban agrees to leave immediately after the fiesta.

The first installment of this four-part serial, herein concluded, was printed in the Argosy for August 21

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Meanwhile the two caballeros, Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez, arrive, determined to settle their grievance. When Don Esteban's oath is explained to them, they agree to wait for the expiration of his term. "But we shall have our eyes on you every moment, *señor*," they declare, "lest another spill your blood before we have the chance."

Don Esteban is more diverted than deceived by the efforts of the handsome SENORITA ANITA DEL RIO to win him for her husband. But when the proud Maria Godines, still outraged and humiliated, arrives with her family, Don Esteban discovers that he is head over heels in love with her.

At the fiesta that night, Don Esteban wins from Maria the admission that her hatred for him has changed to a stronger emotion. With an inward sigh, he realizes that Señor Devil-may-care must vanish forever. No more reckless combats, no more wild pranks.

Then from the darkness comes a whisper. The girl Rosa has brought him the word that will take him into the most reckless combat, the wildest adventure, he has ever known. . . .

CHATER XXV

PLAGUE!

DON ESTEBAN glanced around swiftly. Nobody seemed to be paying special attention to him. He walked on along the wall as if searching for somebody, waited until the dancing began again and the shouting and laughing started; then slipped through the arch.

Rosa stepped back into the semidarkness and waited. When he reached her side, Don Esteban saw a look of fright in her face, and she seemed ready to drop from exhaustion.

"We must speak quickly, *señor*," she said. "Do not remain in my vicinity long. I may be carrying it, though I think not. I have used caution."

"What is this?"

"It is terrible, Don Esteban. When I got back to the hills, it had broken out. One of the sailors from the *Magdalena*, sent to the hills by Miguel Brocamonte, was the first. And he had exposed many others. He had been eating and drinking wtih them—"

"Rosa! What are you saying?"

"'Tis the plague, *señor*—the smallpox."

"What?" Don Esteban cried.

"It is sweeping the hills, *señor*. They crawl away to die. They have no medicines, no help. Now they are threatening to come to San Diego de Alcala, for somebody told them sea air was beneficial—"

"This must be made known," Don Esteban said. "Have you a place to go for rest, a safe place? Here is money—"

"My uncle has a hut not far away, and I have a good horse, *señor*. But I'll rest only for a short time. I must get back. Jorge is there, and I would be at his side."

"Don Manuel del Rio—?" Esteban questioned.

"He is terribly frightened, *señor*. He is in a hut with two of his rancho men to guard him, and will let none of the others approach. They are commencing to say he is a cowardly leader. They look to him for help, and he turns away."

"That will ruin him with them," Don Esteban said.

"But they will come on toward the town, those who have the plague. They will spread it, *señor*. They are frantic. They will loot the *haciendas*, slay—"

"Get you gone," Don Esteban broke in. "Get rest at your uncle's hut. I will do something about this. I was to leave for the hills myself in the morning."

"You must go now, *señor*."

"*Now* is when I must go," Don Esteban said. "It is my duty. This is worse than an uprising, and must be stopped. Where is Gonzales?"

"At the gathering place in the hills this side of Pala. I will show you."

"You must not go back, Rosa—it may mean death."

"Jorge is there,'" she said simply. "So I must go back."

SHE darted away through the shadows, and Don Esteban turned to go back through the arch—and found Señorita Anita del Rio watching him and smiling whimsically.

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"So the fastidious Don Esteban de la Zamora keeps tryst with a ragged peon girl," she said, laughing a little. "What poor taste, *señor.*"

Don Esteban faced her squarely. "She brought me news, *señorita,*" he said. "She happens to know me—"

"Could she not wait to see you? Did she have to intrude at a time of *fiesta?* She must be truly enamored of you, *señor.*"

"The *fiesta* is open to all, so she had the right to be here," Don Esteban said. "She is not enamored of me, nor I of her. She brought news . . . of your brother among others"

"What of Don Manuel?" she asked.

"Smallpox has broken out in the hills among the peons and natives. Don Manuel is there."

"Smallpox?" Her beautiful face paled. "And you have been talking to this girl? Keep away from me, *señor!*"

"So little courage, *señorita?* Your brother is in the midst of it. Allow me to pass, for I must see Capitán Angelus. This is a serious matter."

She cringed back against the wall as Don Esteban went past her. He hurried around the fringe of the crowd toward the guest house. His eyes met those of Señorita Maria an instant, but he only smiled and hurried on.

There came a clatter of hoofbeats, and a hard-ridden horse was pulled to a stop outside the gate. A weary trooper, covered with dust, lurched in, saw Sergeant Salazar and rushed toward him.

"Your *capitán!*" he demanded.

Salazar straightened himself and tugged at his mustache.

"Whence came you, *señor?*" he asked.

"From the post at San Luis Rey. They told me the *capitán* was here. Quickly! Get me to him!"

"You are speaking to a sergeant, *señor,*" Salazar upbraided. "What is all this turmoil? Capitán Juan Angelus, our *commandante,* is amusing himself here at the *fiesta.* No doubt he is at the moment basking in feminine smiles. 'Tis no time to annoy him. I know the *capitán's* temper."

"There will be scant amusement hereabouts if the plague travels this way," the courier warned. "Take me to him, you ass!"

"What is this?" Salazar thundered.

The courier bent forward and spoke in low tones: "Smallpox in the hills . . . spreading badly . . . the people mad with fear—"

Salazar paled. "Come with me, *señor,*" he whispered. "Try to act in normal manner, so these people will not notice. Let them think you bring ordinary official communications." . . .

DON ESTEBAN had entered the guest house at the moment the *capitán* was leaving, and quickly drew him aside. "What is amiss?" Angelus asked. "Your countenance tells me you have news."

"I have heard from my agent. Smallpox has broken out among those who would revolt."

"*Dios!*" Angelus breathed.

"You must act quickly. Mad with fear, the peons may come on toward the town, overrunning the *haciendas* along the way. Now is the time to stop everything. Don Manuel del Rio is with them, but fear keeps him in a hut. They will not listen to him. I will go—"

"You?" Angelus exclaimed.

"I will command the relief expedition. Fray Francisco will want to go, of course. We will take food, wines, medicines, good water. We will teach them how to fight this thing. They will trust a man of rank when he shows he has no fear."

"And have you none, Don Esteban? Smallpox is not a beautiful thing."

"I have my duty, *capitán.*"

"We will get Fray Francisco immediately, and have a conference. Let us go to the office of the mission."

They sauntered out, and Angelus beckoned Sergeant Salazar, who approached at that instant with the courier.

"This man, *capitán*—" Salazar began.

"You are from San Luis Rey?" Angelus asked. "Keep your voice low. I already have heard something."

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"The plague is heavy, *capitán,* and is spreading rapidly. The men in the hills are crazed with fear."

"Can you ride back?"

"If I have a fresh horse."

"Have a man take him to the *presidio* and get him a good horse, Salazar," Angelus ordered. "And you—" he added to the courier—"ride back and pass word that help is coming."

"Tell them," Don Esteban spoke up, "that I am coming with everything needed to fight the plague. I am Esteban de la Zamora."

The courier saluted and turned away.

"Salazar, attend to the man's horse. Find Fray Francisco and tell him to meet us in the mission office immediately. Come there yourself. And do not let the news get out."

But the news was out already. Señorita Anita had told it, and the del Rio carriage had been ordered for the trip home. Two men had overheard the courier speaking to the sergeant, and they spread the news.

Suddenly, the music was still, and there was no laughter. White-faced, the merry-makers looked at one another.

"The plague . . . the red death . . . smallpox—" the whispers ran around the crowd.

They were remembering the epidemic of a few years before, when the red death had swept from one end of Alta California to the other, taking a terrible toll among the natives, invading the settlements, striking down high and low alike.

THERE was a sudden rush for horses and carriages. Those who had come to the *fiesta* afoot hurried away, back to their homes. Panic seized them all.

Don Esteban and the *capitán* met Fray Francisco in the office room of the mission.

"I will go myself," the aged *fray* said. "They are my children, though sometimes wayward; and they trust me. I will cheer the living, pray for the dying—"

"We must have carts," Angelus broke in. "Salazar, see to it! Requisition anything you need. We want medicines, food and drink. Seize strong carriage horses to draw the carts, for oxen will be too slow."

"*Si, capitán!* As to a detachment—?"

"No military detachment," Don Esteban said, quickly. "It would be the wrong touch."

"There must be an official representation."

"With permission, *capitán,* I will go," Salazar said.

"*Bueno!* You are a good man, Salazar. I will enlist special guards and throw a cordon across all roads and hill trails to turn back any who would try to get to San Diego de Alcala. To work!"

Don Esteban rode madly back to the *posada* to get into more serviceable clothing, and heavy boots, and to get a pouch of coins and some special medicines of his own. He gave Felipe instructions what to do during his absence, and rushed out to his horse again. Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez were waiting there.

"Don Esteban!" Feliz cried. "You cannot do this thing. You cannot go! If the plague should strike you—"

"Our business with you would be unfinished," Chavez added.

Don Esteban's eyes twinkled slightly. "I believe, *señores,* that you were to guard me until the expiration of my oath," he said. "Let me suggest heavy clothing . . . and carry your own food."

"You intend to go?" Feliz asked. "And you expect us—"

Don Esteban smiled at them. "I go, but I do not expect you to, *señores.* It is not necessary."

"Fear will not hold us back!" Chavez said.

"I realize that, *señor.* But good men will be needed here, if there is an emergency. I suggest you offer your services to Capitán Angelus. I am quite sure the Governor would approve of that act."

"We shall do so," Feliz replied. "But it is madness for you to go, Esteban."

"I have a duty of which you know nothing. I shall do my best, *señores,* to return alive and well. My I ask of you a favor?"

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"Anything, Don Esteban!" Chavez agreed.

"Look after the welfare of Señorita Maria Godines while I am gone . . . as much as she will allow you. Guard her from all harm."

"Why this solicitude, Don Esteban, for the welfare of a *señorita* you have shamed?" Feliz demanded.

Don Esteban bowed to them. "I have decided to make her my wife, *señores*."

"Your wife?" Chavez roared. "She wishes to see your death. She hates you!"

"She is for one of us, after we have disposed of you," Feliz added.

Don Esteban laughed as he got into his saddle. "Ask her when next you see her," he suggested. "And study hard, *amigos*, and try to learn something of women's ways."

CHAPTER XXVI

ANGEL OF MERCY

MEN immune from the disease had been recruited, good horses obtained, and before daylight the cavalcade left the mission and wound its way up El Camino Real.

Two riders went ahead. Don Esteban and Sergeant Salazar led the carts, four of them filled with what was needed. Arrangements had been made to replenish supplies when Fray Francisco sent back word.

Fray Francisco rode in the first cart, sitting beside the native driver, a veteran of the epidemic a few years before. Mile after mile was covered, though the cavalcade seemed to crawl.

They passed refugees hurrying to San Diego de Alcala, for word had gone out that a ship was there, and might carry them away from the danger zone. They received exaggerated reports of the spread of the evil, horrible stories of multiple deaths.

At the head of the column, Sergeant Salazar swayed in his saddle to ease his body and spoke to Don Esteban:

"Capitán Angelus gave me instructions to watch over you well *señor*. It appears that you hold some sort of official position."

"Say nothing about that last," Don Esteban ordered.

"I have the wisdom which comes with middle age, Don Esteban. And that tells me your trip with us is not merely to try to quiet men ill with a disease."

"I desire to see the country," Don Esteban explained.

Salazar eyed him. "May you live to see it!" he said.

At midday, they had a short stop, then went on. They had covered considerable distance by nightfall, with more refugees passing them and telling their harrowing tales. The center of the plague, they learned, was south of Pala; and Don Esteban knew that was the gathering place of those who had intended to revolt.

After a short rest, they traveled on through the night. Under the bright moon, they left the main highway and wound up into the hills, following rough trails. One of the men rode ahead to give news of their coming.

At dawn, they passed a rancho which had been deserted. They stopped there to have hot food, invading the kitchens and helping themselves to supplies.

THEY traveled on again. Fray Francisco left the first cart and mounted his mule, and rode up at the head of the column. Salazar went back to urge the carts on and to watch for deserters or stragglers.

"Don Esteban, I hope you survive this business," the *fray* told him. I passed through the other epidemic, and I am immune. Even were that not so, it is my duty to be here."

"It is my duty also, *fray*. The information you had from Monterey must have indicated that I am doing something for His Excellency the Governor."

"I understand a little, my son. I know these poor people are being urged to revolt by unscrupulous leaders."

"You know the leaders?"

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"I do not, Don Esteban."

"Miguel Brocamonte is one. He engaged sailors from the *Magdalena* to go to the hills and urge the natives and peons to revolt. Those sailors carried the plague with them. And there is another leader, a misguided man mad with ambition . . . but it would please His Excellency if this man can be deterred from his purpose and his family name not soiled."

"He is Don Manuel del Rio?"

"Si, fray."

"I feared as much, my son."

"The revolt must not start, *fray*. It cannot start without a leader. Brocamonte will not lead openly. And Manuel del Rio—"

"Yes, my son?"

"There are differences between us, as you know. He sensed I opposed the affair and turned his father against it. I feel sure, Fray Francisco, that even his own father would prefer to have him die by the blade than at the end of a traitor's rope. I ask you, *fray,* to release me from my oath."

"My son!" Fray Francisco exclaimed.

"Neither Don Manuel nor any other man must lead this revolt, *fray*. It would mean poor dupes slain and wounded. We must not have political troubles here."

"Disease is a strong warrior," Fray Francisco said.

"Si. It depends on Manuel del Rio. Frenzied with fear because of the plague, they would follow him to San Diego de Alcala now if he led, would follow him anywhere. If Don Manuel is minded to lead them—"

Fray Francisco bowed his head a moment. "I cannot release you from your oath now, my son," he said. "But I understand the situation. I will await developments."

"The oath, as you know, was to concern the two young hotbloods who followed me from Monterey."

"That I know. Don Manuel is another matter. But a *fray* cannot open the door to the taking of human life."

"It may be one life or many, *fray.*"

One of the riders ahead reached the crest of a hill, stopped his mount, then turned and signalled.

"This is the little valley where they are gathered," Fray Francisco said. "I will ride ahead, Don Esteban, and you bring on the carts with Sergeant Salazar. I will speak to my children and explain, prepare them."

The *fray* kicked his mule in the flanks and dashed ahead in a cloud of dust. Salazar came riding to the head of the line again. Don Esteban dropped back to one of the carts to get a drink of water from a skin.

Señor!" he heard a faint whisper, as he put the skin down.

IT WAS like a whisper from another world. She was calling to him, he thought. She was in his blood, else he could not imagine her voice so. "Don Esteban! Give me a little of the water."

Don Esteban jerked erect in his saddle and looked around wildly. The man plodding beside the cart and driving was on the opposite side, and plainly had heard nothing.

"What—?" Don Esteban gulped.

"Lift the skin a little."

The cart's load was covered with skins. Don Esteban bent over from the saddle and lifted the nearest. He saw two wide eyes, lips curved in a smile.

"You!" he gasped. "What are doing here? Are you mad?"

"Perhaps," Señorita Maria replied, putting up her head. "I am almost dead from hunger and thirst. But I did not wish to disclose myself until I was so far I would not be sent back."

"Do you realize—? You are alone with me and these men—"

"The good *fray* is with us. And when did you become so strict concerning the conventions, *señor?"* She was laughing at him.

"This will be the death of me, *señorita.* More young hotbloods will be after me. How did you do it—and why?"

"I told my father—my first lie to him

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—that I wished to sleep all day. I left a note saying what I had done. Then I hid in one of the carts when nobody was looking. As to the why . . . need you ask, Esteban? I would be with you, work beside you and do what I can."

"Angel!" he said. "But the risk—?"

"I have no fear when I am near you, Esteban."

"These men in the hills . . . rough, coarse . . ."

"What of it, Esteban? You go among them, so why not I? If I can ease the dying moment of but one—"

He bent swiftly and kissed her. "We must do something about this at once. Fray Francisco has ridden ahead. He must perform an emergency marriage between us, for the sake of the conventions. But there will be another ceremony later."

"I whispered the truth about us to my father, *señor,* and he smiled and wished me happiness."

"I'll get you food and wine," Don Esteban told her. "And a horse. You can ride beside me after you have eaten."

He carried food and wine to her, then galloped ahead and told the tale to Salazar. The sergeant grinned.

"There is a proper *señorita,*" he said. "A girl of courage and kindness. You are a fortunate man, Don Esteban. May heaven grant that both of you come through this safely. I will get a horse from the extras we are bringing with us."

The drivers of the carts and the outriders were wide-eyed when they saw the *señorita* helped from the cart and put into a saddle. They cheered her as she went to the head of the column with Don Esteban. And there Don Esteban took charge, and sent Sergeant Salazar flying ahead to tell Fray Francisco what had happened.

Salazar relished that duty. He caught up with the *fray* before Francisco had met the first of the men in the hills. In the distance could be seen makeshift huts on a hillside, with men wandering around them. They saw the carts coming, and knew what it meant, for one of the outriders had gone forward with the news.

"KEEP back, sergeant, while I ride ahead and speak to them first," Fray Francisco said. "Under the circumstances, your uniform may frighten or enrage them. These men who have been planning an uprising have guilty consciences, and may think the soldiery is coming down upon them."

Fray Francisco kicked his mule in the flanks again and dashed forward. Down the side of the hill men poured toward the trail, white-faced men with fear in their eyes.

" 'Tis Fray Francisco!" one shouted.

They crowded toward him as he stopped his mule, shouting at him, holding out their hands imploringly, kneeling for his blessing.

"My children!" Fray Francisco cried. "Do not fear! Do not let panic claim your hearts. This visitation may be turned aside. Ask yourselves whether you have transgressed in some manner to cause this plague to come upon you. If you have, rectify your transgression now. Cease your evil ways."

They glanced at one another. That thought struck home. They had planned revolt, theft, murder.

"I have brought you help," Fray Francisco went on. "I ask that you obey me in everything I say. Will you do so?"

"Si! . . . Si!" they shouted. "We have nobody but you."

"You have God always!" the *fray* rebuked. "We have brought medicines, proper food. We will fight to aid those who are ill, and to keep the disease from spreading. You must obey orders. A sergeant of the soldiery has come to help, a man who had this pestilence years ago and fears it no more. He is your friend. And others have come. Don Esteban de la Zamora, him they call Señor Devil-may-care in Monterey, risks death to be here with you and help you. He deserves well at your hands. Listen to his words of wisdom. Nor is that all."

Fray Francisco looked around at the ragged men who were crowding forward, the light of hope in their faces now. They

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had felt so alone before, and now they had the strength of knowing they were not alone.

"With us also has come a fine *señorita,* a lady of high degree, the affianced bride of Don Esteban, to show you, *señores,* that all ranks are equal in the face of a peril such as this. Young, beautiful, with everything to live for, she risks death to help you. Fall back a space, now, and await my orders."

The carts came on, with Don Esteban and the *señorita* riding ahead. The men on the hillside cheered. Sergeant Salazar galloped up beside the *fray* again.

"Let us have the carts at the edge of that little clearing," he suggested. "I'll place guards around them. I am at your orders, Fray Francisco."

CHAPTER XXVII

RECRUITS

ORDERS were issued rapidly, and carried out without protest. Makeshift huts where men had died were burned. A burial party began its gruesome work on the side of the hill. Huge fires were kept going and anything believed to be contaminated was tossed into them.

There was a small stream around the bend of the hill, and Fray Francisco ordered all to go there and bathe, destroy their clothing and put on garments which had been brought. He ordered them to approach in a long line, and gave them preventive medicines. He instructed them to live in small groups, and the groups scattered, and to report immediately if any had fever or chills.

Sergeant Salazar and Don Esteban worked with the sick, examining them and doing what they could. The *señorita* carried supplies to the workers, and the men of the hills blessed her as she passed. So they worked through the day and into the night, and finally stopped to eat hot food and rest.

A small tent had been pitched off to one side, for the use of *Señorita* Maria. Before an improvised altar, Fray Francisco conducted an emergency marriage ceremony in the moonlight, with peons and natives as guests.

" 'Tis only for the sake of convention," he told the pair. "You are not to consider yourselves properly married. You will have the tent to yourself, *señorita.* When we return to San Diego de Alcala, there will be a marriage in the regular manner."

After the *señorita* had retired, Don Esteban cleansed his body in the stream around the shoulder of the hill, changed garments, drenched himself with medicines, and wandered back toward the fires. He held speech with Salazar for a moment, and walked away as the sergeant began nodding. He saw that guards had been stationed around the carts.

"Don Esteban!"

The whisper came from a dark spot at the side of a mass of rocks, and without answering Don Esteban walked that way, for he knew it was Jorge Gonzales.

"Sí?" he asked. "How is it with you, Gonzales?"

"I have had the disease, and do not fear it. But here is Rosa."

"Nor do I fear it, *señor,* when I am at the side of Jorge," she said. "I would be as brave as the *señorita* you wed tonight."

"You are both brave," Don Esteban said. "Talk to me quickly, Gonzales."

"Manuel del Rio is in a hut he had the men build for him. It is just over the hill. He is afraid of the plague. Two men from his father's rancho guard him with guns held ready."

"Does he know I am here?"

"Sí, señor. I think he contemplates some move against you. He is afraid the men will turn from him now. He tells them the sergeant may learn everything and betray them to death. He is urging that they strike at once, move on toward San Diego de Alcala."

"Watch him closely, and report to me often," Don Esteban directed. "Rosa can help *Señorita* Maria if she will, and attend her."

"That would be best, *señor,*" Gonzales said.

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HE DARTED back into the darkness, and Don Esteban took Rosa with him to the tent, calling Fray Francisco and asking *Señorita* Maria to come out.

"I know this girl," Don Esteban explained. "She works with an agent of His Excellency. She brought me the report of the pestilence. If she cleanses herself properly, and medicates herself, she will be a companion for *Señorita* Maria."

"For whom, *señor?*" Maria asked, smiling and dimpling. "Is it not *señora* now?"

"Cleanse yourself in the stream, my child," Fray Francisco directed Rosa. "Put on fresh garments—we brought some with us. But first smear your body with this ointment, and put some of this salve into your nostrils."

"I will sleep on a skin in front of the tent, *fray,*" the girl said. "I have been exposed to the plague, and would not risk harm to the dainty one."

"You are a good girl," Fray Francisco praised. "Guard yourself well."

The night passed, and in the morning the work began again. There were three burials, and some new cases were isolated. The men lined up to receive medicines. Don Esteban watched them, trying to read their faces, wondering if Manuel del Rio was trying to stir them up against him.

Gonzales was in line, and caught his eye. After Gonzales had passed, Don Esteban followed him to a secluded place behind some rocks.

"Manuel del Rio is spreading more reports," he said. "He is telling them now that this is all a trick, that they are being identified as they come for medicines, and will be arrested and hanged later."

"Does the man never leave his hut?" Don Esteban asked.

"If he does, Fray Francisco and Sergeant Salazar may ask him what he does here. He will not come from the hut until he is ready to strike."

"When will that be, Gonzales?"

"I am not certain, Don Esteban. But it will be well for you to be on guard."

Don Esteban walked back to the fire and watched the men drawing supplies from the carts. Fray Francisco was visiting the huts, and Señorita Maria was with him with Rosa at her side. This would be a slow fight. But there was order now, and the fight would have method.

IT WAS the heat of the day when a puff of dust showed at the crest of the hill, and a man shouted some riders were coming. They topped the hill, two of them, and bore down upon the clearing.

Don Esteban watched their approach with interest, wondering if Capitán Angelus was sending news from San Diego. But as they drew nearer, he saw they were Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez, and groaned.

"There are pests even in the midst of a pestilence," he muttered.

They jerked their lathered mounts to a stop and sprang from their saddles. Lurching across the rough ground, half exhausted from hard riding, they confronted Don Esteban, their eyes blazing.

"So, *señor!*" Juan Feliz cried. "This time you have gone too far. Oath or no oath, Don Esteban de la Zamora, you fight now!"

"What is this?" Don Esteban asked.

"You have dared abduct *Señorita* Maria and bring her here to this place of disease and death," Marcos Chavez cried. "What manner of man are you?"

"A note was found, but we know you compelled her to write it. Her father is frantic with fear for her."

"We have promised to slay you and return her to the mission," Juan Feliz added. "Choose your ground, *señor!*"

The men of the hills were watching the scene closely, and Don Esteban knew they must not think those of high birth were quarreling among themselves. He tossed up his head and laughed.

"You are amused, *señor?*" Chavez asked, almost frothing at the mouth.

"He is mad!" Feliz decided. "I have suspected it for some time. A mad dog must be slain."

"Are you calling me a dog, *señor?*" Don Esteban hissed at him, his laughter sud-

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denly gone. "It appears there are things you do not know. Allow me to say, *señores,* that you dabble considerably in matters which do not concern you."

Fray Francisco came up to them; he had heard a part of what had been said.

"The *señorita* came in a cart of her own free will, and we did not know she was with us until we were almost here, *señores,*" Fray Francisco explained.

"This man has duped you also, *fray.*"

"Why not let the *señorita* speak for herself? Here she comes."

Señorita Maria strode foward with Rosa a step behind her. Her face was pale, for she had just looked upon death.

"You are here, my friends?" she asked. "You have come to aid these poor people? That was noble of you."

"We have come to save you from your abductor and return you to your father, *señorita,*" Juan Feliz said.

"And to punish this man who stole you away," Marcos Chavez added. "Oath or no oath, he must face the consequences now!"

"You are speaking of Don Esteban? He did not steal me, *señores,* for such a thing would have been unnecessary. And I do not desire any harm to come to him."

"He has bewitched you!" Feliz cried. "He hides behind a woman's skirts!"

"He is my husband, *señor,*" she said.

"What is this?" Marcos Chavez roared.

"Fray Francisco married us last night in the moonlight . . . a temporary marriage which will be completed as soon as possible in a chapel."

"So! Don Esteban compromised you and tricked you into a marriage?" Chavez shouted.

"What a low, base trick!" Feliz added.

The *señorita* laughed a little. "There was no trickery," she said, "unless it was on my part. I hid away in one of the carts to be near Don Esteban. Perhaps I compromised him and made him wed me, eh? The fact is, *amigos,* I love the rascal and would be ever at his side. When he came into this danger, I could do nothing but follow him."

"You love him?" Chavez gulped. "After the incident in Monterey?"

"A fortunate incident," she declared. "Had it not happened, none of this would have come about."

"I—I see."

Juan Feliz retreated a step and hung his head. "We have been happy to serve you, *señorita,*" he said. "But now there is no need to serve you further. We will return to San Diego de Alcala and take your father the news."

"I have already dispatched a man with a letter to him," she said.

Fray Francisco stepped forward. "And, *señores,* since you are here, you may remain and help us," he said. "Unless you are afraid of the pestilence—"

"Afraid?" Feliz cried.

"I fear nothing!" Chavez added. "Show us what there is to be done!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

MOMENTS BEFORE BATTLE

THROUGHOUT the remainder of the day, Don Esteban and the young hotheads fraternized with peons and natives, made friends with them, talked sense to them. Señorita Maria went among them also with Rosa, asking after their condition. Fray Francisco and his helpers continued their work to stamp out the pestilence. And Sergeant Salazar strolled here and there, stroking his huge mustache and keeping an eye on everything, though his official presence made some men uncomfortable.

He came across Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez down by the stream.

"You toil like veterans, young *señores,*" the sergeant said. "So you do not have to fight Don Esteban after all?"

"So it apears, *señor,*" Feliz replied. "We were ready for the encounter. Though we did not have much hope of a beneficial outcome for us. Don Esteban is a master with a blade. For another to stand before him—"

"Is suicide . . . I know," Salazar growled. "Spare me the recital of it. If it is

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fighting you wish, *señores,* you may have it yet, on the side of His Excellency the Governor. For there is treason and sedition in the air."

"We heard rumors of an uprising," Chavez said. "But where are those who would revolt?"

Salazar grinned. "You are in the midst of them, *señor.* This spot is the hotbed of rebellion. But I think their hearts have changed, at least some of them. However, it will be well to be on guard."

The sergeant grinned again at the expressions in their faces, and walked on. There was no disorder, nothing for the sergeant to do officially. He strolled up the stream until he came to a secluded shady nook, and there stretched himself to rest, and presently fell asleep.

He was awakened by an avalanche of human bodies descending upon him. He tried to get at his blade, but his belt had been unbuckled as he slept and the blade taken away. He squirmed and kicked, but they bore him to earth and held him there, one struck him on the head with a bludgeon and dazed him, another gagged him with a piece of dirty cloth.

SALAZAR was picked up and carried cautiously along the tiny stream and into the dense brush. Strength returned to him, and he began fighting. They dropped him to earth again, beat and kicked him into submission, picked him up and carried him on.

Finally, they reached a new hut and carried him inside. Don Manuel del Río was sitting there on a stool.

"Bind his arms and legs," Don Manuel ordered. "Render him helpless, and remove the gag."

Half dazed, Sergeant Salazar finally was propped up in a corner of the hut on the floor. At Don Manuel's gesture, one of the men gave him water to drink.

"I regret it was necessary for my men to treat you roughly, sergeant, but it was the only way to subdue you," Don Manuel said.

"What is the meaning of this, *señor?* You have ordered an attack on one of His Excellency's soldiers?"

"I did," Don Manuel replied. "I care little for His Excellency, and less for his soldiers. However, I know you for a good man, sergeant. If you care to join your fortunes with mine, I can use you."

"In what manner?" Salazar asked.

"I need an experienced soldier to be my second in command."

"So you are starting a revolt?"

"Is it not known?"

"Not generally," the sergeant said. "It is suspected in certain quarters. But it was hoped, Don Manuel, that you would think at the last moment of what failure would mean to you and yours, and turn aside from the enterprise."

"There will be no failure!"

"This handful of men . . . and not half of those are with you," Salazar said. "They are stricken with disease and panic. They think the pestilence is a visitation upon them because they considered treason. Some of them are more loyal to Miguel Brocamonte's gold than to you. For you are not the type to be a leader, Don Manuel. Were it Don Esteban—"

"Don Esteban!" Manuel del Río cried. "When we come face to face—"

"You know where he is to be found, *señor,*" Salazar said, coldly.

"He hides behind an oath."

"Ha! That oath does not prevent him fighting in defense of his life. If you made an attack, he would have to defend himself."

"So!" Don Manuel said, thoughtfully.

"Don Esteban has been very considerate, *señor,* in your affairs. He has not called on outside force to undo you."

"What do you mean?"

"In the detention room at the *presidio,* Don Manuel, we hold the man who confesses that you hired him and two others to assassinate Don Esteban. But Don Esteban would not let Capitán Angelus issue an official complaint and drag your family name in the mire."

"Ha! He was thinking mostly of my sister, perhaps."

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"I do not think he has special interest there, Don Manuel, since he married another lady last evening."

"So I have heard. A pretty gesture to the conventions. They had an affair in Monterey, I have heard."

"If Don Esteban heard you say that, *señor*, no doubt he would forget his oath. And, if you are the politician you profess to be, you will not besmirch that lady's name in front of others. These poor dupes adore her because she is working among them, trying to save them—"

"Enough! 'Tis of you I would talk," Don Manuel said. "Will you join me? You can have power over men. I will make you rich. When I have taken the Governor's place, I will give you high military rank. What more can you desire?"

"Peace of mind and ease of conscience, *señor*. I am a soldier, and happen to be true to my uniform."

"Then we must use other measures."

"You will perhaps have your men carry me deep into the brush and stab me?"

"Not that, *señor*. I shall hold you as hostage. There may come a moment when you will be of value to me."

"You flatter me, Don Manuel. I am of little value to anybody else."

"Remain as you are, sergeant," Manuel del Rio directed. "I must have conference with some of my men."

PROPPED up against the wall of the hut in the corner, Sergeant Salazar listened. He could hear voices outside the hut, but could not make out the words. He heard men running, and decided Don Manuel was calling his forces together.

Then he heard Don Manuel's loud speech:

"The moment has come! These who have arrived in a pretense of helping are but here to delay you until soldiers can gather. I forced the sergeant I have in custody to admit that. We must strike now, get away from this place of pestilence."

A chorus of cheers greeted the announcement. Salazar tried to estimate the number of men, but the echoes which rang back from the rocks confused him.

Don Manuel continued his tirade. They would raid the camp in the clearing, he said, take what supplies they needed, and rush on over the hills toward San Diego de Alcala. They would seize the *presidio* and mission there, help themselves to what loot they wanted. That would start the flame which would run up the coast.

Sergeant Salazar had been tugging at his bonds, and got one loose. The men who had handled him were not adept at trussing up a man. He freed his hands, then his legs, and got quickly to the rear of the hut. During a burst of cheering in front, he tore out a section of the flimsy wall and went through.

Cautiously, he got back into the brush. Then, traveling as swiftly as he could, he reached the little stream and hurried down it toward the clearing.

His head was ringing as he staggered into the clearing and shouted for Don Esteban. A moment later, he was in close conference with Don Esteban and the *fray*.

"They will be coming soon," the sergeant said. "We must prepare a defense."

Fray Francisco walked over by the fire and lifted his arms toward the sky. Men walked slowly toward him, knowing he had something to say. Those able to do so came from the huts and from their resting places beneath the trees. Silently, they stood and watched him.

"My children!" Fray Francisco said. "I never have misled you, have I? I have come to you now, with these friends of mine, to do what I can to help you. The time has come for you to show your appreciation."

He spoke rapidly, explaining what Don Manuel del Rio intended. He urged them not to join the revolt. He showed how they would be but dupes, that no good could come of it, that Don Manuel was but serving his own selfish ends.

Then Sergeant Salazar began barking orders, and they ran to obey. They armed

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themselves with what they had—bludgeons, sharp stones, implements of the fields, a few old blades they had picked up.

And so they waited.

CHAPTER XXIX

HOMEWARD, THE CABALLERO

OUT of the brush came Don Manuel del Rio and his men. Don Manuel rode at their head. They spread out as they came to the edge of the clearing, crouched, ready to charge.

The escape of Sergeant Salazar had warned Don Manuel that he would have to move quickly, but he had not moved quickly enough. He saw determined men drawn up to protect the carts and supplies, saw Don Esteban and Sergeant Salazar walking among them, giving orders. And old Fray Francisco came forward afoot, holding up his arms.

"What is this, Don Manuel del Rio?" the *fray* asked.

"It does not concern you, *fray*. Return to your mission and mumble your prayers, and leave men's work to men."

"One of the prayers shall be for you, *señor*. I know what is in your mind, and it is wrong—"

"I have no time to listen to a sermon."

"Think of your father, your family!"

"I am thinking of them, *fray*. I intend to give them a high place."

"Failure will mean that your life will be forfeit. It would not be seemly for a del Rio to hang."

"Stand aside, *fray*, and protect yourself from injury. We wish to seize the supplies you brought."

"These sick men—"

"The sick will remain behind until they are well . . . or dead."

"But those who may carry the disease to the *haciendas* and settlements—"

"We carry fire and the sword!"

"You are mad, Don Manuel," Fray Francisco declared. "Can I say nothing which will deter you?"

"You cannot, *fray*."

"You would urge men on to injury and death in a cause unworthy. Better that you die yourself, *señor*. There is one here present who has reason to face you. You engaged others to take his life foully. For the last time, Don Manuel del Rio—will you leave these men, return to your father's house and cease this murderous foolishness?"

"I will not, *fray*. One side!"

Fray Francisco stepped aside, turned to face the men by the carts, and called:

"Don Esteban de la Zamora, I release you from your oath!"

His voice rang and was echoed back by the rocks. Down by the carts, Don Esteban found the *señorita* clinging to his arm.

"Esteban—" she sobbed.

"Fear not for me, beloved."

"If aught ill happens to you, my life is done."

"This is something which cannot be evaded."

"I know," she said.

"It is more than merely something personal. This man would cause death and misery."

"I know what you must do," she said, holding up her hand and blinking back her tears. "Return safely to me, Esteban."

He kissed her, then gestured to Rosa, who took her by the arm and led her away.

SALAZAR slapped him on the back. "Good fortune attend you!" the sergeant said. "I have heard over much of your prowess with a blade. Convince me, *amigo*."

Fray Francisco was back by the carts now, his head hanging as his lips moved. He looked up and gave the sign of blessing, and Don Esteban walked forward. Gonzales smiled at him fleetingly. The men on both sides were still.

Don Esteban walked away from the carts and line of men, out into the open space where the ground was fairly level and cleared of stones. He stopped, and lifted his hand.

"Don Manuel del Rio!" he called.

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"Well, *señor?*" Dan Manuel answered.

"I charge that you hired assassins to slay me, a cowardly trick unworthy a man of your blood. I charge that you are a disgrace to your family name. You are but a low poltroon, not worthy to associate with honorable men—"

Don Manuel gave a bellow of rage, and sprang out of his saddle. His face purple with wrath, he strode forward. Don Esteban awaited him calmly. His shoulder was sore and stiff, and he was fatigued because of the events of the last few days. But he did not lack confidence.

Don Manuel came to a stop a few feet in front of him. He drew himself up to a full height.

"Is a blow necessary, *señor?*" he asked.

"I consider that I have received one," Don Esteban replied.

Don Manuel stepped back a pace and whipped blade from scabbard.

"On guard, *señor!*" he cried.

Don Esteban's blade came from its scabbard like a streak of light. Steel rang as they began circling. Don Esteban's face was an inscrutable mask as he fought, save that his eyes gleamed strangely.

He had no liking for slaying a man. Yet nothing else could be done here. Don José would perhaps thank him that it had happened this way, that his headstrong heir had been spared the rope.

But it would not be an easy task, Don Esteban knew in that first moment of fighting. Don Manuel del Rio was well trained in the handling of a blade. His first rage had passed, and he had grown cool, methodical, deadly. The lust to kill was in his heart.

Don Esteban made a misstep, and Maneul del Rio was at him with lightning speed. Don Esteban saved himself and retreated for a moment, breathing heavily, and Maneul del Rio pressed his advantage. Their blades clashed and rang as they circled. The watchers were silent save for muttered imprecations.

Another furious onslaught, and Don Manuel got through Don Esteban's guard. Don Esteban felt the sting of steel in his arm beside the old wound, felt the gush of hot blood down his sleeve. He heard the chorus of sudden cries which came from the watchers.

That sting of steel invigorated him. His blade became like a live thing. Furiously, he parried and fought, driving Manuel del Rio backward. Into Don Manuel's face came an expression of fear.

"For the honor of your family, *señor,*" Don Esteban gasped, in low voice.

HIS blade darted forth again and came back red to the hilt. Don Manuel del Rio dropped his weapon and reeled an instant, then crashed face foremost to the ground. Don Esteban de la Zamora stepped back, removed his sombrero, and made the sign of the cross.

"What a blade!" Sergeant Salazar cried. " 'Tis suicide for a man to stand before him. There, I have said it myself!"

They rushed forward, Juan Feliz and Marcos Chavez in the van, to seize him and slap him on the back.

"*Señor,* we are glad it is not necessary to fight with you," Juan Feliz said.

"Though we would do so if occasion demanded," Marcos Chavez added.

Don Esteban turned back toward the carts. He had tossed his blade aside, and Salazar picked it up to cleanse it. Fray Francisco had walked out into the clearing, and was addressing Don Manuel's men.

"Now you have no leader, *señores.* This foolishness must end. I advise it, and I never have given you ill advice, have I? We will fight this pestilence, then we will march back to the mission at San Diego and have a ceremony of thanksgiving. Then, forgiven, you will return to the ranchos where you worked, and go to work again, for there is merit in honest toil."

Fray Francisco wrote a report of the affair for Don José, had Don Manuel's body wrapped in *serapes* and bound to the back of a horse, and assigned two men to take the remains to the Del Rio *hacienda.* Don Esteban wrote a short re-

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port also, which he sent to Capitán Angelus.

Evening came, and Don Esteban, sober in mood, walked through the moonlight with Señorita Maria.

"Though it was necessary, it saddens me," he said. "I like to think of life, not death."

"Esteban, I almost died. The blades will ring in my ears forever."

"Tomorrow, you must return to the mission. Feliz and Chavez can escort you."

"Would you trust your wife to a pair of young hotheads, *señor?*" she asked, smiling at him. "My work here is not done. I remain at your side."

For the space of two weeks more, they fought the pestilence, and finally conquered it. Couriers traveled between them and San Diego de Alcala daily. So they learned that Don Manuel del Rio had been given burial. And Miguel Brocamonte had died of the smallpox; the two men who had visited him the night he was whipped by Don Esteban had carried it to him. His was the only case of the pestilence in the town.

THEN there came a day when a cavalcade approached the town along the dusty highway. It moved slowly, for many men were walking.

At the head rode Don Esteban and the *señorita,* smiling happily at each other, and with Fray Francisco on his mule close behind them. Marcos Chavez rode on one side of the column of carts and Juan Feliz on the other, pretending to be lieutenants of the expedition. Sergeant Salazar was behind, urging on the men who trudged happily through the dust.

They came to the town and halted for a short time near the *posada,* and Felipe came running up to Don Esteban, tears streaming down his face.

"*Señor!* You are back safe and sound!" he cried.

"*Sí,* as usual. When I return from the mission, I will want a bath in perfumed hot water, and fresh clothing. See to it!"

A carriage stopped, and Don José del Rio descended from it. He had ridden to town alone. There was silence as he approached Don Esteban, who waited with blank face to receive him.

"*Señor,* I cannot take the hand of the man who slew my son," Don José said, in low tones. "But I can thank that man for saving my son from ignominy."

Then Don José turned back to his carriage, his head bowed, and was driven away.

Another carriage approached, this from the direction of the mission. Señorita Maria sprang off her horse before Don Esteban could help her, and rushed to her father's arms.

"My child!" Don Luis said. "Into what folly will you plunge next?"

"None, now that I have a husband to curb me," she said, dimpling.

"You are happy?"

She glanced back at Don Esteban, who was walking toward them. "Could I be otherwise?" she asked. "We will have a grand wedding in the mission chapel. And, if it is your wish, Esteban will purchase a property here, and here we will live. When you find happiness in a certain place, 'tis best to remain there, lest in moving you lose what you have found."

Then, Fray Francisco raised his arm, Sergeant Salazar caught the motion and bellowed a command to march, and the procession went on out the road toward the mission, Don Esteban riding in the Godines carriage with the señorita and her father. Capitán Angelus, who had suddenly appeared from the *presidio,* gave them the honor of his official escort.

"Don Esteban, I have sent a report to Monterey," the capitán said. "I gave a glowing account of your exploit."

But Don Esteban was not listening. He was watching the glow in the cheeks of the *señorita* as she looked up at him and gently squeezed his hand.

THE END

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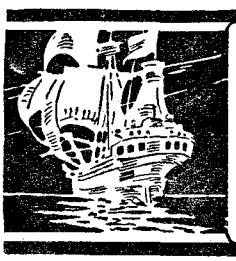

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

THE first few times that we discovered ARGOSY carefully concealed under three other magazines on someone's living room table we suspected nothing; we thought merely that the magazine had been hidden by accident under lesser periodicals. We would haul it out, display it fittingly on the top of the pile, and forget about the whole thing.

But then we began to hear sheepish murmurs, and we caught several people scurrying down the street with ARGOSY tucked away under their coats. Button-holed, they would admit that they enjoyed the stories tremendously; but the cover—well, after all! We got it then: ARGOSY was being kept out of the sun simply because so many of its readers were ashamed of the rather violent covers. They felt they had to smuggle a copy into the house and read in bed by a flashlight. So we took drastic steps, and we think there should be no reason for furtiveness now.

Here is a reader who agrees with us.

EDWARD QUIGLEY

Due to all the war news and books piling up, I haven't been able to read much of ARGOSY for about three months, except "The Harp and the Blade," by John Myers, and "Very Warm For Washington," by Wm. Brandon, both of which were very entertaining. But I'm buying a copy each week and storing it up for a rainy day, for it doesn't take so much courage to buy and carry home a copy of the magazine now, with its sedate cover. It's no longer necessary to look hurriedly around, then quickly bury the evidence in the folds of a newspaper before some friend might catch us. Those old covers were bad. I only hope the magazine is successful in its new clothes.

The stories that stand out most in my memory for the past year are, first, "Bugles Are for Soldiers," by Charles Marquis Warren, a really beautiful piece of work, almost comparable to Hornblower. Possibly some of Warren's technical details were not altogether accurate, but he made both soldier and Indian seem real, which is the main thing.

Jack Mann's "Maker of Shadows" was quite good, not Merrit to be sure, but a very good substitute. The illustrations by Virgil Finlay, like all of Finlay's things, were excellent, and should be a feature of each story of fantasy in ARGOSY. "The Stars Spell Death," by Jonathan Stagge was a good mystery, well sustained, and MacIsaac and Harkins did a good job in "River Rogues." Zagat writes to formula, but his Tomorrow series is timely in material, and holds the interest.

Besides, we need such sensational imaginings to wake us up; true, we're stirring in our sleep, but we're not quite awake yet. Have Borden Chase give us another "The Sun Sets at Five." That might help. I never found "Smooth" interesting until this one. "The Green Flame" was an original idea well handled. Eric North should be able to do a good story of the possibly coming invasion.

Your novelets are almost always bad, but you do print some shorts that are first rate. Robert Arthur, with "Miracle on Main Street," "Victory," etc., is very dependable for the unusual. Garnett Radcliffe's stuff is dramatic and convincing and Pangborn's Chinatown tales are sound in plot and treatment. But the story I most enjoyed this year was "The Last Illusion," by John Ames York. It was very original in conception, difficult to execute, but done to a turn. I think it one of the smoothest examples of a surprise ending I've ever come across.

Well, I didn't realize I'd written so much: sorry. Hope you stick to the new design covers and produce another story by Forester one of these days. Oh, yes; "All At Once, No Alice," by Cornell Woolrich, was one of your few novelets of interest.

PHILADELPHIA, PA.

Our thanks, Mr. Quigley.

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ONE of the older conflicts still raging intermittently in this department concerns the vital problem of Icicles in the North. Here is one more installment; from its authoritative tone it may very well be the conclusion. We wouldn't know.

JAMES L. FORSYTH

This is the first time I ever wrote to a magazine and it will probably be the last time, but a letter in your March 23rd issue got my goat.

One expert (?) from Los Angeles, California, says there are no icicles in the North. With all due respect for Mr. Batchelor, I would as soon say there are no oranges in California. In other words, he is all wet. If Alaska and the Yukon were night-bound all the year around, his argument might be so. But . . .

In the first place, the Arctic is like all the rest of the world; there are four seasons. The snow and ice don't suddenly start to melt and continue to melt until gone, nor does it suddenly freeze up in the fall and remain frozen until the next spring. Also in the depths of winter there are thaws.

The cabins of the North must be kept warm, and as the roof is generally covered with snow in the winter months, the heat from the cabin fire will often melt the snow coating. The water runs to the eaves and freezes there, forming—what else can you call 'em?

Also I would like to point out that there is no place on the North American continent where there is a six-month season of night. There are very few places habitated by men where the sun does not appear every day unless hidden behind clouds.

The No-Shirt yarns are fine. Though a bit burlesqued, they are reasonably true to life, and we enjoy 'em up here.

I don't expect I'll ever see this in print as I only picked up the March copy by accident. Boomers don't subscribe to magazines for obvious reasons.

ALTA, CANADA

Looking Ahead!

BLACK FIRE

Rustler, you've got the whole Border jumping to the rattle of your guns and you're riding high and handsome. But you'd be smart to take warning, for Black Boy Tooker is carrying a knife and a six-shooter—and he's singing you a deadly lullaby. A dramatic novel of the West by

WALT COBURN

CAPITOL CALAMITY

His Excellency is missing! Snatched from under the noses of State Department officials. Official Washington embarrassed, to put it mildly. And a scoop for Toby Shade, if he could get it. If you think your daily life is complicated, let Toby show you the District of Columbia from behind the scenes. A fast-paced novelet of Washington jitters by

WILLIAM BRANDON

THE GOLD THAT RAN AWAY

A treasure to be had for the taking—and all a man needs is the wit and the nerve to take it. Excitement and adventure down Mexico way in an unusually colorful and exciting novelet by

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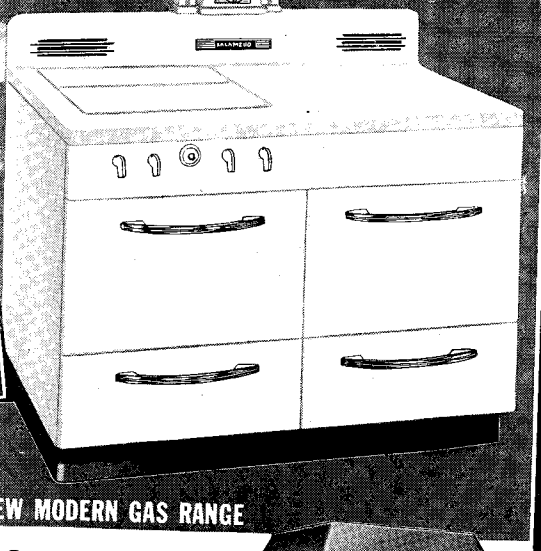

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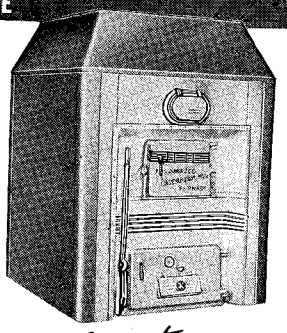

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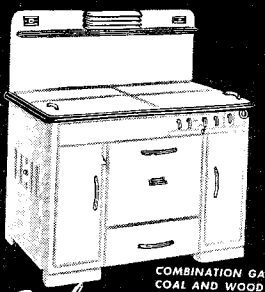

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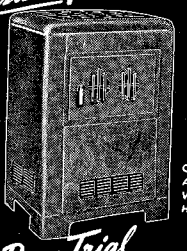
COAL AND WOOD RANGES

Quality



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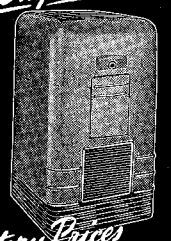

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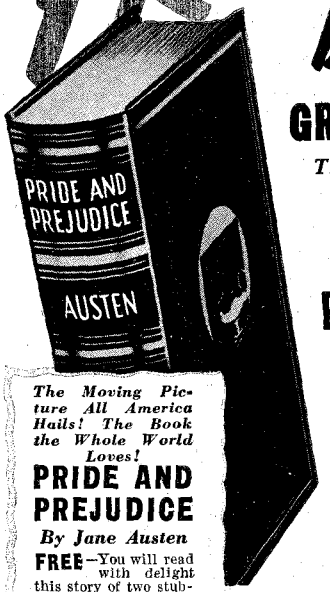

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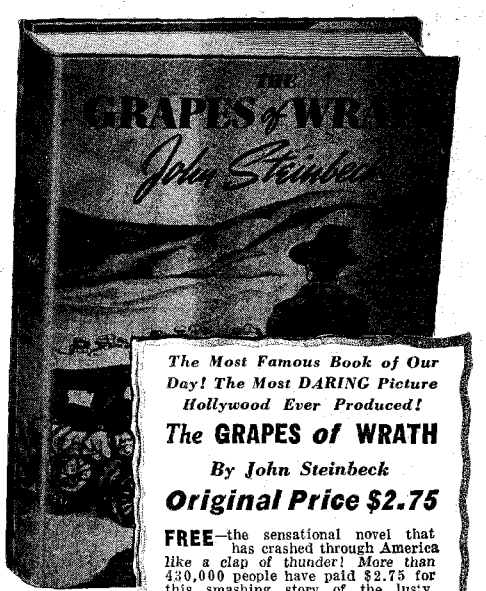

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